



Illinois House approves austere spending limits

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. - Virtually every part of state government would be forced to cut spending under a budget outline approved Thursday by the Illinois House, where even supporters called it a "painful, painful" decision.

The spending plan calls for cutting the Medicaid health program by \$2.7 billion or about 14 percent of the total. Officials acknowledge they don't know how they'll reach that target, but it's likely to involve eliminating services such as dental care or prescription drug coverage for adults.

Lawmakers said other government programs, from schools to prisons to agriculture, will share a \$900 million cut, or about 5 percent of what they're getting now.

Officials are forced to consider the cuts because revenues are stagnant, but state expenses for health care and government pensions are climbing dramatically. That leaves less and less money for other programs.

Illinois already is deep in a financial hole, with unpaid bills of roughly \$8 billion. State leaders say government must cut spending dramatically to start filling that hole or risk a virtual collapse of key services.

"It is going to be a painful, painful year, but we have the future of these children and the future of the poorest and most vulnerable in our hearts," said Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago.

The budget outline was approved 91-16. It now goes to the state Senate, where leaders support the same general approach but not necessarily the specific amounts approved in the House.

Some legislators strongly opposed the deep cuts, saying they will fall heavily on the people who most need the state's help. Illinois should borrow money or find new revenue, they said. One legislator warned he might push for dipping into the state road fund to pay for other services, an idea that is virtually taboo in Springfield.

"This is a failure. We should not go down this path," said Rep. Mary Flowers, D-Chicago. "We should not balance this budget on the backs of poor people."

The measure calls for paying about \$1.3 billion in overdue bills, or about 16 percent of the backlog. Most of that would go to doctors and hospitals that have provided care under Medicaid.

The annual contribution to pension systems climbs by nearly \$1 billion.

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The measure is HJR69.