



AIDS: Advocates push against healthcare budget cuts

by Erica Demarest, Windy City Times
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HIV advocates urged Illinois lawmakers to resist healthcare budget cuts as the Illinois House Human Services Appropriations Committee gathered March 16 in downtown Chicago.

"In addition to saving lives, HIV services are also very cost-effective," said Ramon Gardenhire, director of government relations at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC) . "The anticipated cost of these proposed budget cuts—in terms of new infections and medical care—would be a \$6.9 million increase in 2013 alone. The projected long-term cost would be \$40 million."

On Feb. 22, Gov. Pat Quinn proposed a lean \$33.9 billion budget that would include massive Medicaid cuts, a \$4 million reduction in HIV programs, layoffs, and several state-run facility closures. The AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) would remain untouched.

Ramon and five other local activists testified against the proposed cuts recently in the Michael A. Bilandic Building, 160 N. LaSalle St. About 40 people gathered for the 3-hour meeting, which focused on line-item cuts.

HIV research and community-based services were tops for reductions, while certain medication programs were left unscathed.

"The entire catalogue of HIV services works in tandem together to make sure that no new infections occur," Gardenhire said. "If someone has to worry about housing, mental health services, and dental services, they're much less likely to be medically adherent, which means there's a possibility for increased transmission."

Committee Chair Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-12) , who presided over the meeting, expressed concern about testing and education cutbacks.

"This is the first time we've seen such a significant reduction on the prevention side," Feigenholtz said. " [Since focusing on prevention in the state] , we've seen breathtaking reductions. My fear is that the number will change and the transmission rates will grow."

Chicago Black Gay Men's Caucus (CBGMC) Secretary Craig Johnson, who works as a community health promoter at Rush Hospital, highlighted how cuts could affect minority communities.

"We're often a constituency that you do not see heavily in the room, but we know that we're disproportionately affected in the state of Illinois," Johnson said. "When we see other demographics' disparities leveling off, we're still seeing increases in the African-American community, especially among Black gay and bisexual men."

Johnson argued that fewer HIV-negative people would get tested as a result of the proposed cuts, and that fewer HIV-positive people would have access to life-saving care.

Renee Radosz, a corrections case manager at the Austin Health Center, shared a personal story to illustrate how destructive cuts to community organizations can be.

After working for some time with released inmates, many of whom were HIV-positive, Radosz lost her job to budget cuts. Though the health center was later able to rehire Radosz, many of her clients left the program and relapsed during her time away.

Had Radosz been able to work with the former inmates consistently, she argued, most or all of her clients would've remained on track.

"This is going to cost the state millions if these individuals go back [to jail] ," Radosz said.

Feigenholtz promised to take the testimonies into consideration before making any final budget decisions.

"This committee truly appreciates the gravity of this cut and how it affects people in the community," she said. "We're hoping that perhaps there's a way we can work around it somehow. It's early in the game—probably about the second inning. We could go the extra innings."

Republican spokeswoman Rep. Rosemary Mulligan (R-65) and Rep. Robyn Gabel (D-18) joined Feigenholtz on the committee. Salud Latina Executive Director Patricia Canessa, Families and Children's AIDS Network Project Director Linda Coon, and HIV Housing Assistance consumer Vincent Moorman also offered testimonies.

Pictured: From left: Linda Coon, Project Director, Families and Children's AIDS Network; Renee Radosz, Corrections Case Manager, Austin Health Center - CBC Initiative; Ramon Gardenhire, Director of Government Relations at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago; Patricia Canessa, Executive Director, Salud Latina; Craig Johnson, Secretary, Chicago Black Gay Men's Caucus. Photo by Erica Demarest

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