



Our Opinion: Restore funds for child-care program

GateHouse News Service

Posted May 08, 2012 @ 07:00 AM

As fractious and divisive as American politics has become in recent years, there is general agreement that the welfare reforms enacted in 1996 represented a major step forward.

In creating Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act tied government aid to work requirements. The new law's main goal was to discourage long-term dependence on government assistance and get recipients working. States had latitude in how they went about that goal.

In Illinois, it has meant helping low-income parents who are either working or attending college pay for day care for their children through the Child Care Assistance Program. The program helps more than 85,000 parents in the state pay for day care they might not be able to afford if paying full price. Without it, many parents would lose jobs or lose the chance to get better jobs that comes with education.

Last week, though, those parents and their day-care providers got an unexpected warning that their safety net — or their lifeline to employment, depending on how you view it — was about to disappear. Funding for the program had run out early because enrollment in the broader Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program has skyrocketed over the last three years, and TANF and the child-care program are paid from the same fund. The state is required to make timely payments to families receiving TANF funds, but not to child-care providers.

In short, the child-care program comes up **\$73.6 million short** for fiscal 2012, and the state has notified some 40,000 providers that payments for most of April, May and June won't arrive until the new fiscal year begins on July 1.

On Friday, Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, introduced a **bill** to fill the child-care fund void. The legislature should waste no time making sure that this funding is restored.

Having chastised our local lawmakers for demanding budget cuts while rejecting virtually all suggested cuts, it would be hypocritical for us to endorse this bill if we couldn't identify its funding source. In this case, though, the money for child-care assistance will come from unspent Medicare Part B premiums charged to the state by the federal government. This is money that would have come back to the state anyway; the bill puts it under the authority of the Department of Human Services.

We point this out to dispel any notion that the missing \$73.6 million will come from some magic money store in the nether recesses of the state budget.

The counterproductivity of removing assistance that keeps parents employed (or helps them prepare for better employment) hardly needs explanation. Right now, about 10 percent of the parents who receive child-care assistance also qualify for TANF. Taking away child-care assistance almost certainly will lead to lost jobs and, consequently, more families qualifying for TANF — a program that has grown by 80 percent since 2009.

Don't get us wrong: Budget pain for fiscal 2013 is inevitable and necessary. There will be few, if any, easy decisions for the General Assembly in the next three weeks. Passing House Bill 6164 and keeping low-income parents at work should be one of them.