



# Illinois Week in Review: Medicaid reform, eavesdropping limbo, respite for Rep. accused of bribery

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SPRINGFIELD — With the clock ticking on the legislative session, ending Thursday, Illinois lawmakers began chipping away at the state's big financial problems this week with a Medicaid spending reduction bill.

Lawmakers also approved reducing the number of regional offices of education in the state. Meanwhile, efforts to reform the state's draconian eavesdropping law stalled, and a culprit was found for March's primary ballot box problems.

## **Medicaid cuts, but with a catch**

The General Assembly [passed](#) the first half of a plan Thursday to rein in the skyrocketing costs of Medicaid, but the deal comes with a catch.

Among the ways to reduce Medicaid spending by \$1.6 billion, or 12 percent, were tighter screening to prevent fraud and the elimination of state assistance for pharmaceutical drugs.

[Senate Bill 2840](#) passed by a vote of 94-22 in the House and 44-13 in the Senate.

The new Medicaid spending plan would let the state "continue to take care of the most vulnerable people ... and keep Medicaid afloat," said the bill's House sponsor, state Rep. [Sara Feigenholtz](#), D-Chicago.

The catch is that the cuts are contingent on two different bills:

One, which passed the House, ends the practice of rolling over Medicaid costs from year to year — one reason the program's costs have soared.

Another, which passed the House and Senate, allows Cook County's Medicaid system to expand eligibility, from 100 percent of the federal poverty level to 133 percent, two years earlier than required by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the national health-care law.

Cook County has its own separately funded Medicaid system.

Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn said he'll sign the legislation, although as part of a search for Medicaid funding, he wants to increase the state's cigarette tax by a \$1 a pack.

### **Illinois House OKs cutting the number of regional offices of education**

A plan to trim the number of [regional offices of education](#) in Illinois and shift their funding cleared the House unanimously Friday and now awaits Quinn's approval.

[Senate Bill 2706](#) would reduce the number of regional offices from 44 to 35 and fund the offices with money from the state's general revenue fund.

"I think this is a very good step. The regional superintendents themselves realize that, although they have a very serious responsibility, the state could no longer afford to have the number of service regions that we have at this time," said state Rep. Jerry Mitchell, R- Sterling.

The measure incorporates recommendations from the [Streamlining Illinois' Regional Offices of Education Commission](#). The panel was created to study the offices after the governor zeroed out funding for them last year in an attempt to save the state \$12 million. Quinn wanted the regional superintendents to be funded at the local level, not the state. Lawmakers eventually restored funding by using corporate tax revenue. The reduction of nine offices is expected to save the state \$1.5 million.

Which regional offices will be eliminated is not clear, but counties can consolidate voluntarily until June 2013. After that, the decision lies with the Illinois State Board of Education.

The regional offices of education act as a liaison between the Legislature and local school districts. Their duties include reviewing school construction projects and certifying bus drivers.

### **Eavesdropping reform bill in limbo**

After the House [passed](#) a bill letting people take audio recordings of police in public, the measure stalled in the Senate, leaving First Amendment advocates scratching their heads.

The sponsor of [Senate Bill 1808](#), state Sen. Michael Noland, D-Elgin, said he isn't letting it stand for a vote without changes.

Noland said he wants to "reconcile" the proposal with [recent court rulings](#) that deem the law unconstitutional, and add additional provisions to allow police to record the public.

The House voted Tuesday to change the state's eavesdropping law to allow the civilians to make audio recordings of police officers in public, as every other state in the country permits. In Illinois, recording officers in public, whether accompanied by film or just on a sound recorder, is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Josh Sharp, a government relations director for the [Illinois Press Association](#), a media and First Amendment group, and said the courts are all but asking the General Assembly to address the issue. Three courts have found the law unconstitutional, but prosecutors can still try to enforce the current law, Sharp said, leaving it in limbo.

### **Humidity a cause March ballot problems, experts say**

During Illinois' March 20 primary election, 26 voting jurisdictions had problems with paper ballots not feeding into scanners, baffling some experts.

The mystery is over and a [culprit was found](#) — humidity.

"It is possible that the problem ballots were just so close to the limits of the acceptable width tolerance that the additional humidity alone was enough to put them out of tolerance," according to a report from Illinois [State Board of Elections](#).

Many of the problems occurred in Winnebago County in northern Illinois, suburban DuPage County outside Chicago and Macoupin County in central Illinois, according to elections officials, who noted that a factory problem with how the ballots were trimmed also is thought to be a factor.

### **Lawmaker accused of bribery gets respite, awards scholarships**

With Illinois lawmakers' attention focused on crafting a budget, indicted state Rep. [Derrick Smith](#) will likely get a respite from his House colleagues.

Several members of the [House Special Investigative Committee](#) looking into federal bribery allegations against the Chicago Democrat said the committee is not expected to meet before the spring session ends Thursday.

"As you can imagine, things are a little hectic around here right now," said state Rep. [Elaine Nekritz, D-Northbrook](#), chairwoman of the investigative committee.

"My time is very limited by the whole pension thing. Everyone else's time is taken up by the end-of-session crunch," said Nekritz, one of several legislators negotiating cost-saving changes to the state's public pension system, which is facing a \$83 billion unfunded liability.

Smith is pleading not guilty to federal bribery charges for allegedly accepting a \$7,000 bribe to steer a \$50,000 state grant to a Chicago day care.

Smith told his colleagues he will not resign, and he's also taking advantage of a legislative perk that's about to expire.

Smith gave out \$185,000 in college scholarships to eight Illinois students, [according to the Chicago Sun-Times](#) — even after the General Assembly voted Monday to abolish the scholarships amid controversy over various abuses. Smith was absent for the vote.