

Quinn to veto prisons funding, give more to DCFS

By Bill Ruthhart

Clout Street

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Gov. Pat Quinn plans to use savings from shuttering several prisons to offset a deep budget cut aimed at the state agency charged with protecting abused and neglected children.

The \$33.7 billion budget landed on the governor's desk today, and he's got until late Saturday night to act on it. Quinn told the Tribune he plans to veto spending lawmakers dedicated to several prisons he plans to close.

During the fall legislative session, Quinn said he will press lawmakers to use those savings to restore most – if not all – of a \$50 million cut the legislature approved for the Department of Children and Family Services.

About half of the lawmakers' cut would force the agency to reduce its staff of 2,900 by about 12 percent, or 375 workers. The remainder of the cut would eliminate contracts that provide services to children and families, the agency said. The budget trims by lawmakers came on top of a \$35.3 million reduction Quinn had proposed.

The Tribune has reported that the caseloads for DCFS investigators are often double what they should be and in violation of critical terms of a 1991 federal consent decree that sets monthly limits on new cases for investigators. The agency also is failing to inspect more than half of the state's day care facilities on an annual basis as required by law, the Tribune has reported.

Quinn called the consent decree dictating investigators' caseloads “a landmark decision.”

“I don't think we should go back on that, and I don't want to go back on that. We need a partner in the General Assembly to appropriate the proper money to carry out the court decision,” he said.

The governor's plan to close prisons is expected to save the state about \$62 million, some of which his administration has said would be redistributed within the Department of Corrections.

The administration says it will shut down the super-maximum prison near Tamms in far southern Illinois, the Dwight Correctional Center in central Illinois and juvenile justice centers in Joliet and Murphysboro. Three transitional centers for inmates, including one on Chicago's West Side, also would be closed.

Quinn said he's closing Tamms because it is only half full and the state spends three times as much to incarcerate prisoners there than it does at other state prisons.

"For the General Assembly to fully fund that, but underfund the Department of Children and Family Services, I don't think that's a good call on priorities," he said. "I think the priority is children, not a half-empty prison."

While Quinn can choose not to spend money the General Assembly sends him, he needs lawmakers' approval to redirect the money to DCFS.

"In November, we're going to have to support our reductions, and the legislature may try to override it," the governor said. "But we are going to lay out a stark choice: Is it protecting children or is it maintaining facilities that don't need to be open?"

Lawmakers fully funded a number of facilities Quinn proposed to shutter in his original budget, but legislative budget leaders acknowledged he could still impose the closures.

Still, Quinn has faced sharp criticism from both Democrat and Republican Downstate lawmakers whose districts will lose jobs due to the closures. They contend he is being insensitive to their constituents while favoring the Chicago area.

Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, the chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee for Human Services, defended the cut the legislature passed for DCFS, saying the agency long had been protected because of its consent decree and lawmakers could not afford to pass up a stiffer cut for the department this year. Feigenholtz said she was confident the agency could meet the consent decree terms even with the additional cut.

But the North Side Democratic lawmaker also said she is open to considering Quinn's proposal in the fall.

"I think the governor's idea of taking the money out of DOC after he closes state prisons is inspired," Feigenholtz said.

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