



Illinois Governor Approves Strip Club 'Skin Tax' to Fund Rape Crisis Centers

So-called "sin taxes" exist for smoking, gambling and alcohol, and now Illinois has passed a "skin tax" for [strip clubs](#), which backers say will raise up to \$1 million a year to fund rape crisis centers in the state.

[Illinois Governor Pat Quinn](#) signed a law creating the Sexual Assault Services and Prevention Fund, sponsored by Democratic State Senators Toi Hutchinson and Sara Feigenholtz. The state senate passed the bill by unanimous vote in May; a similar bill has already passed in Texas.

Created in response to declining state funding for rape crisis centers, the new law allows the Illinois Department of Human Services to administer the fund to centers, which will be supported through the Live Adult Entertainment Facility Surcharge. Strip club operators will pay a charge on gross receipts on a tiered basis, or a \$3 surcharge for each patron. The law takes effect Jan. 1, 2013.

"I think in the end, everyone negotiated in good faith," Hutchinson said about the rape crisis center advocates and club owners. "The one thing we all agreed on was these services needed funding. As long as that was the overriding goal, we could concentrate where the money was going."

[Hutchinson](#) introduced a version of the current bill in the state legislature on Feb. 7.

Hutchinson had initially proposed a \$5 tax for the entry of each customer admitted into a live adult entertainment facility. She said the \$3 surcharge and tiered structure, which is dependent on a club's size and revenues, was a compromise proposed by club owners.

The Coalition Against Sexual Assault, an advocacy group, first approached Hutchinson with the idea to sponsor the bill. Polly Poskin, executive director of the coalition, said her group's

funding has dropped by \$1.2 million the past three budget years. She applauded the governor for signing the bill.

"This law is a victory for rape victims and the dedicated rape crisis centers who work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in communities across the state of Illinois to provide supportive, caring services to survivors of sexual assault," said Poskin. "They will benefit from this innovative and important funding stream."

Hutchinson has said she was not trying to shut down strip clubs and hoped to conduct open discussions with the industry.

Chicago's Admiral Theatre was "strongly opposed to the proposed pole tax," Sam Cecola, the North Side club's director of operations, told the [Chicago Tribune](#) earlier this year. Micheal Ocello, president of the Illinois Club Owners Association, told the Tribune when the bill was first introduced that he could not find scientific proof "that going to an adult club causes people to go out and commit rape, commit crimes," though he applauded Hutchinson for "trying to do something good."

Some sociology research has shown connections between strip clubs and organized crime and human trafficking in places like Queensland, Australia. Sheila Jeffreys, a political science professor at the University of Melbourne, wrote a paper called "Keeping Women Down and Out: The Strip Club Boom and the Reinforcement of Male Dominance" in 2008.

"Strip clubs are not separate from society but influence on many levels the way men relate to women," Jeffreys wrote.

Anthropologist Katherine Frank said one can't single out strip clubs as promoting the treatment of women as sexual objects. She said attempts to link violence against women directly to visiting strip clubs or viewing pornography would be "far too simplistic."

"Women can be objectified in many settings, from the workplace to the street," Frank told ABC News after the Illinois bill was first proposed.

Poskin said the coalition explored the idea two years ago to help women in rape crisis centers but the "timing wasn't right." She said the group had waited to see how the state of Texas responded to a similar tax.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry signed a \$5 "pole tax" law in 2007, which also collects \$5 from alcohol-serving strip clubs for each customer who enters the club in order to fund sexual assault prevention programs. A strip club owner in Texas and the Texas Entertainment Association sued the state attorney general and comptroller over the tax, saying it restricted free speech. But the Texas Supreme Court ruled in August 2011 ruled that the fee was constitutional and was only a "minimal restriction."

Texas has already raised millions since the law was enacted and state lawmakers estimate it will bring in about \$44 million.

In late June, [the Houston city council proposed a similar \\$5 tax](#) to help pay for rape testing kits for victims.

Hutchinson said what was most moving to her was that the conversation about the tax remained elevated.

"In Illinois, where we spend more money on perpetrators of sexual assault than the victims," she said. "I was proud of the fact that we were able to have a conversation that was difficult but necessary. I know a lot of these groups have had to close and cut off counselors. I think that needs to be the focus of what we're talking about. It's easy to make jokes but there is nothing about this that is funny."