

## **Rauner Funding Cut to Preschool for HIV/AIDS-Affected Kids Promises Political Fight**

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Governor Bruce Rauner has trumpeted both his intention to "shake up Springfield" and his intention to prioritize education, but the budget that he has unveiled may have dented both goals.

Rauner has proposed eliminating a \$390,000 Illinois Department of Human Services grant to the Humboldt Park-based Children's Place Association, which provides specialized preschool to about 65 toddlers of low-income Latino and African-American families who earn, on average, \$5,000 per year. Approximately 50 percent of the kids are from HIV/AIDS-affected families. The others suffer from a broad range of medical disabilities.

Insiders were struck by the political tone-deafness of the cut, given the charged history of the well-regarded nonprofit and its 13-year struggle to cling to the funding for its preschool and specialized nursing care for ill children.

Governors George Ryan, Rod Blagojevich, and Pat Quinn had all tried -- but failed -- to eliminate the grant for budgetary reasons because it was easy, low-hanging fruit for budget cutters.

"Children's Place has always had its own line item in the budget, making it a visible target to simply zero out by GOMBy [Governor's Office of Management and Budget]," said a long-time lobbyist familiar with the situation. "That Rauner would take a page from the budget playbook of George, Blagojevich, and Quinn, who were all forced to back off because of furious Latino lawmakers and the optics of whacking a preschool for HIV/AIDS-affected toddlers, is stunningly dumb."

The source noted that when Ryan sought to nix the grant in 2002, it was then-State Rep. Angelo "Skip" Saviano (R-Elmhurst Park) who interceded with the governor to help reverse the decision.

"Skip talked to George, and amidst other political pressure, he backed down and agreed with lawmakers to restore the money in the final budget," the source said.

The insider also said that when Blagojevich tried to eliminate the grant in 2003, Children's Place Association employees and volunteers blitzed Blagojevich's Chicago Ravenswood neighborhood, distributing window signs to homeowners and plying flyers to CTA riders at the nearby Francisco train station and to parents at the local park.

"One cheeky volunteer even noticed Patti Blagojevich sitting in the park one afternoon with her kids and quietly approached the first lady and gave her a flyer," said the source. "The horrible PR and Latino legislators forced Blago to eventually cave."

Still, even success has had its price.

In FY 2001 the state grant totaled \$780,000, and although complete elimination has been dodged, each attempt to deep-six the money has whittled away the grant until it reached its current \$390,000 in FY 2015.

Cutting that last bit of money struck a nerve for Children's Place Association Executive Director Cathy Krieger.

"There is not an ounce of compassion in a budget that cuts child care and preschool for HIV/AIDS-affected toddlers of families struggling with illness and extreme poverty," Krieger told The Insider. "With parents often too sick to teach them their ABCs, they would start off years behind and never be able to compete when they grow up."

In addition to teaching ABCs, the Children's Place Association provides, critically, specialized nursing care to ill toddlers at its early learning center.

The illnesses among the kids range broadly. One 3-year-old has Erb's palsy, which resulted in loss of use of one arm, though surgery and physical therapy have improved function in the child's arm. Another preschool kid, 4, suffers from autism, epilepsy, developmental delay, and seizures. The school's nurse helps care for a 5-year-old who struggles from complications due to HIV/AIDS. And on and on.

The illness of parents also touches their children.

The Children's Place Association provides mental health care and speech therapy to a 5-year-old child whose mother is HIV-positive and blind and has kidney failure.

Still, Rauner's budget cutters have determined that the Children's Place Association's preschool education and nursing care fall outside the governor's "compassion" agenda.

State Senators Iris Martinez (D-Chicago) and Willie Delgado (D-Chicago) and State Rep. Cindy Soto (D-Chicago) have taken the lead among Latino lawmakers in the preschool's multiple battles with the budget ax-wielding governors, but other lawmakers, such as Saviano and State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago), have also flown to the preschool's rescue in the past.

The Children's Place has also drawn the interest and support of State Rep. Greg Harris (D-Chicago), the chair of the House Human Services Appropriations Committee, and State

Senator Daniel Biss (D-Evanston), who was struck by the grant's total elimination, a source says.

Martinez, who has criticized Rauner for reducing the ranks of Latinos in top state posts, is looking to reverse the cut to the Children's Place Association because she considers it another assault by the GOP governor on the interests of Chicago's Latino community.

Martinez was already spoiling for a fight before the budget speech.

Rauner has now given her one.

Meanwhile, the governor's list of looming budget battles has just grown longer, tougher, and, likely, louder.

Stay tuned.

Marshall and his [wife](#), Mishi, have been actively involved in many Chicago events to raise money and awareness about the mental health community using their Project375 Foundation as a platform for their cause.

State Representative Sara Feigenholtz has made mental health care an important issue during her 20 year career. She praised Marshall's work.

He is so passionate about the issue of stigma in mental heal and he has added so much to the conversation, not just on the field, or around the field but also as a spokesperson for so many advocates around mental illness," Feigenholtz said.

She believes Marshall will continue with his work and even though he's leaving Chicago. Now in New York, he will have an even bigger stage.

"I'm confident that he will continue to be an ambassador and a spokesperson, not only on the national level, not only in Chicago and Illinois, but also more globally," Feigenholtz said.

The trade Friday, the first by new Jets general [manager](#) Mike Maccagnan, is for an unspecified draft pick, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because neither team had announced the deal.

The trade cannot become official until the NFL's new league year begins next Tuesday.

Marshall, who turns 31 on March 23, has played the last three seasons with the Bears. He had 61 catches last season, his lowest total since his rookie year with Denver in 2006 while dealing with injuries.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*