

Rauner's office, Dems clash over gov paying \$250K salary out of autism, epilepsy money

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Beth Purvis' \$250,000

*Salary is being paid out of a department that funds epilepsy and autism services. A House panel today is reviewing the issue.
|AI Podgorski/Sun-Times Media*

Gov. Bruce Rauner's office repeatedly clashed with House Democrats on Thursday as a House panel attempted to examine why the governor's \$250,000 handpicked education secretary is being paid out of a budget meant for the state's most vulnerable.

At the onset of the committee hearing, the governor's office released a statement calling it a "sexist smear" — a characterization that further fired up House Democrats later in the day.

At issue was why Rauner was paying a member of his cabinet — Beth Purvis — out of the Department of Human Services budget. That agency has been the target of past and future cuts.

“It really looks bad when we’re taking poor people off of child care, and kicking them off of community care and paying somebody out of this budget,” said state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago. “I think the optics are bad. My only request is that you go back to the governor’s office, speak to your counsel, and find another place to pay Beth Purvis out of the state budget, please.”

The hearing was called in response to [a report in the Chicago Sun-Times last week](#) that revealed Rauner’s education secretary was being paid out of the Department of Human Services. That department had been the target of \$26 million in cuts aimed at autism, epilepsy and burials for the indigent. While those services were restored, DHS faces additional cuts over the next year.

“I think this line of questioning is really hypocritical,” said Rauner aide Richard Goldberg as he testified on Thursday. Goldberg characterized the hearing as a distraction from a budget that is \$4 billion out of balance. Goldberg defended the practice of “off-shoring” as something past administrations had engaged in and said that the state doesn’t operate in silos — it’s all taxpayer money.

Members of the committee said it might not be prudent to follow in the footsteps of past governors such as Rod Blagojevich and Pat Quinn on that issue.

As a shot across the bow, the governor’s office released a list of salaries and benefits of top Democratic staffers, including the chief of staff to Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago.

The hearing grew heated and divisive along political lines, with debate over the matter spilling over onto the House floor later. Democratic committee members, who said they were troubled not by Purvis’ salary — but from where it was being paid out of — and the governor’s office, who dismissed the hearing as a political sham.

“You’re speaking to a committee that has the right to ask you questions . . . you keep going around in circles,” said state Rep. Edward Acevedo, D-Chicago. “I think the only sham that’s going on today is the answers you’re giving us right now. So if you want to speak to us like that, I’m gonna speak the same way towards you. Because I’m not a little child that’s going to sit here and be chastised by the governor’s office.”

Purvis herself did not appear before the committee, though numerous members said they wanted to question her personally.

Later in the day, state Rep. Lou Lang, D-Skokie, blasted Rauner's aide on the House floor.

"You used that committee time as an opportunity to be insulting and to be degrading and to say things that are beneath the dignity of this chamber," Lang shouted. "I stand against those comments. I stand against that press release. . . . Those comments were degrading to the process, and they should stop."

When Lang sat down after his remarks, Democrats gave him a standing ovation, including Madigan — who inched toward Lang while applauding and smiling.

"This is an example of gotcha politics at its worst," said state Rep. Ron Sandack, R-Downers Grove. "Precious dollars are being wasted, right here, right now — and it's a waste."

But House members in turn said Goldberg was creating a distraction and not answering why Purvis is being paid out of a department that funds the state's neediest, including services for autism and epilepsy. Goldberg said he has answered, explaining Purvis is looking at education from "cradle to career," which overlaps with DHS.

State Rep. Gregory Harris, D-Chicago, rattled off a list of services that could have been paid for with \$250,000, including day care funding.

In March, when Rauner hired Purvis, a former charter school director, her salary was the highest-paid position in the governor's cabinet.

On Sunday, the Sun-Times reported that [another top Rauner aide, Jennifer Hammer](#), is being paid her \$155,000 annual salary out of the Department of Human Services budget. Hammer, identified by Rauner's administration as the governor's senior policy adviser, testified last week in a different committee as the governor sought implementation of his Turnaround Agenda.

Rauner was asked about his practice of "off-shoring," taking the salaries for his employees out of budgets other than the governor's budget.

“We are all about reform,” Rauner responded. “We have assembled the most talented team of leaders that I know of to turn around a state government. I’m very proud of our team. And we are going to drive a transformation.”

Harris blasted the off-shoring.

“This lucrative salary for the state’s head of education is paid by an agency where Governor Rauner recently eliminated funding for autistic children and after-school tutoring and wants to make further reductions that would drastically impact services for the frail, the elderly, children with disabilities and our most vulnerable citizens,” said Harris, who chairs the House Human Services Appropriations Committee.

“Taxpayers and the families who stand to be seriously harmed by the governor’s slash-and-burn budget plan deserve an explanation. This six-figure salary buried within the Department of Human Services could go a long way toward helping to fund medical care services for the elderly, persons with disabilities, struggling families, autistic children or any number of other services provided through the department.”

Purvis’ contract, signed March 13, indicates that she’s being paid out of the Department of Human Services, even as it states she will “report directly to the governor’s chief of staff or designee.”

Three weeks after Purvis’ contract was signed, the governor’s office announced that the Department of Human Services was strapped for cash and sliced \$26 million in services including for autism, epilepsy and burials for the indigent. The cuts, later known as “the Good Friday Massacre,” caused some programs to shut down. The cuts caused a furor, prompting Madigan to call a public hearing on why it happened after Democrats said they believed a budget deal with the governor protected such services.

Contributing: Tina Sfondeles