Springfield, Illinois mayor's suicide highlights social crisis in Illinois

Clement Daly
8 January 2011

The state of Illinois enters 2011 with the worst budget deficit in the country. Municipalities throughout the former industrial stronghold are also in severe budget crises, including the cities of Chicago and Springfield, the state capital. In one particularly grim sign of the times, Springfield Mayor Tim Davlin died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest on December 14.

The two-term Democratic mayor had recently announced he would not seek re-election amid growing personal financial problems. In the months leading up to his suicide, the mayor's economic and legal troubles spiraled out of control. Davlin, who was divorced and only 53 years old, leaves behind four adult children and four grandchildren.

Davlin's personal financial troubles involved his role as executor of the estate of a relative who died in 2003. At that time, the estate was valued at around $845,000. In May of last year, the Internal Revenue Service filed a tax lien against Davlin's property for $89,702.11 in unpaid income taxes for the years 2003, 2005, and 2006.

Two weeks later, Catholic Charities of Springfield, a beneficiary of the deceased relative's estate, requested Davlin be dismissed as the estate's independent administrator. In response to this, a Sangamon County associate judge ordered Davlin to provide a financial accounting of the estate by September 22.

After Davlin failed to show up for the hearing, Circuit Judge Pete Cavanagh removed him as the estate's administrator. This prompted the estate's attorney Patrick Timoney to withdraw, claiming that a financial accounting was not possible because Davlin was unable to provide the necessary documentation. Timoney then submitted a $19,000 claim against the estate for his own legal fees.

On December 14, Davlin again failed to appear at a scheduled hearing before Judge Cavanagh to discuss the future of the estate. A 911 call placed that morning alerted authorities that his body was found in his home.

In reporting his death, the media outlets—which only the day before had been raking through the details of his finances and personal life with typical sensationalism—issued the obligatory mournful eulogies.

The story of Davlin's tax troubles reached the press in late October just prior to the filing deadline for the upcoming spring mayoral election. The mayor denied it had any bearing on his decision not to seek re-election, saying instead that he didn't want the "grueling" work of managing the city, facing its own looming financial problems, to burn him out. "No one has any idea what it's like until they've been there," he said.

Davlin largely defied the media's hounding on his personal finances. "I want to make a comment about some personal issues that have been brought up lately, and my comment is that I firmly believe those issues will be resolved in the near future, and when they are, I will make sure you know about it," Davlin told prodding reporters after a city council meeting. "That's pretty much my only comment about it." In an e-mail to *The State-Journal Register*, Davlin had written simply, "My dispute with the IRS stems from taxes owed on investments cashed in several years ago used to purchase my home so that I would have no mortgage."

Relatively speaking, the sums involved are peanuts. Davlin earned a salary of $119,764, according to city payroll records, and reported no capital gains since 2003 on annual statements of economic interest filed with the county clerk's office. Sangamon County property records show that Davlin bought his home for $237,500 in 2004, just slightly above the median home value for that time.

The personal tragedy of Davlin's suicide must be placed within the context of the growing economic and social crisis in general and in Springfield in particular. Although he was in a leading political position in local government, the social pressures exerted on him were more in tune with those upon the average worker than his masters.

Census data released in September showed a dramatic rise in poverty in Sangamon County to 13.5 percent. One out of every five of the county's children lives in poverty—the highest level in at least three decades. For children living in Springfield, the rate was 26.5 percent. Among single women with children 17 and younger, the county poverty rate hit 50 percent, representing a nearly 75 percent increase over the past decade. In Springfield's 14,000-student school district, nearly 66 percent are eligible for free or reduced-rate lunches.

Over the past decade, Sangamon County has seen an inflation-adjusted median household income drop of $4,565.

The surge in poverty is due largely to rising unemployment. According to Nina Harris of the Springfield Urban League, there has been a "drastic increase" in the past year and a half in people seeking job training, job-search and child care services, as well as assistance with rent and utilities. "The effects of the recession have a disproportionate impact on people who are already struggling," said Harris.

Moreover, the county's one-time advantage as the seat of the state government is being eroded as public sector workers are becoming the next scapegoats for the recession. (See "US state governments prepare attacks on jobs, wages, pensions.") Nationally, Illinois faces the worst budget deficit in the coming year, with a projected revenue shortfall of $13-$15 billion—half or more of the state's $26 billion budget. State workers, including thousands in Sangamon County, are being targeted for layoffs and pension cuts.

However, the growth of poverty and unemployment is not peculiar to Sangamon County but is part of a larger trend affecting Central Illinois and the rural Midwest. This is driven by decades of deindustrialization and a decline in manufacturing in the region coupled with limited and inadequate social service infrastructure.

In nearby Christian County, a decline in industry and particularly coal mining has fueled a 12.5 percent decline in real household income over the past 10 years. The lack of prospects in the county are indicated in the fact that only 13 percent of adults have a bachelor's degree or higher. Consequently, there has been a 78 percent increase in child poverty over the past 10 years. At the county's Taylorville School District, half of the children receive free or reduced-rate lunches opposed to one out of four only a decade ago.

In the Jacksonville School District in nearby Morgan County, the child poverty rate has jumped from 10.6 percent to 25 percent in the last decade while the inflation-adjusted median household income for the county dropped by $3,000. Consequently, half of the district's students receive free or reduced-rate lunches—up from 30 percent in 2000.

Further north in Marshall County, there was a 34 percent increase between 2007 and 2009 in the number of families receiving food stamps. In Lacon, the county seat, the local food pantry reported a 35 percent increase due to unemployment. Particularly devastating are the number of patrons in need due to underemployment.

"We're seeing a lot of people whose hours have been cut," the pantry's coordinator, Rev. Kay Harding, told Peoria's *Journal Star* in May. "Some of them would've been better off getting laid off. They're making less than they would be on unemployment, but they can't quit because they wouldn't be able to get unemployment."

In its 2010 report on poverty in Illinois, the Heartland Alliance identified 71 of Illinois' 102 counties as either at risk of increased poverty or headed for worse poverty rates. In making their determination, researchers analyzed unemployment rates, teen birth rates, and high school graduation rates, as well as median household incomes, foreclosures, bankruptcies, credit scores, and the number of families receiving food stamps.

Of the 12 million residents in Illinois, about 760,000, or 6 percent, are in extreme poverty—meaning they subsist on less than half the federal government's official poverty line.