Cook County, Illinois to cut jobs and social services

Kyle Turner, Alexander Fangmann
24 February 2011

On February 1, Toni Preckwinkle, the newly-elected Cook County Board President, presented a proposal that aims to close a $487 million deficit through severe budget cuts, mass layoffs, and furloughs in the second most populous county in the US with 5.3 million residents.

Shortly after assuming office in January, Preckwinkle—an established Democratic powerbroker—called on all county department heads to reduce their budgets by 16 percent, which would result in the firing of as many as 2,150 county employees, some of whom she referred to as "slackers and shirkers." Residents of Cook County, which includes Chicago and its closest suburbs, will be subjected to drastically diminished services as well as fewer opportunities for employment.

The hardest hit department will be the Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH), which will see its budget reduced by 21 percent. Such a radical budget reduction will not only deprive many of services, it will cause delays in and a reduction of the quality of treatment for those able to get appointments. The higher cuts in this department are the result of an ongoing strategic plan initiated under Preckwinckle's predecessor, Todd Stroger, which calls for the gutting of costly emergency services.

Already on February 14, it was announced that 138 nurses would be laid off at Oak Forest and Provident hospitals, pending approval by a state board. While still accepting walk-in emergency room patients, Provident Hospital, on Chicago's south side, will also no longer accept ambulances. Ambulances will have to take patients to facilities farther away, risking health and lives. Oak Forest Hospital will be converted from a hospital into a "primary care center," requiring south suburban residents needing urgent care to seek treatment elsewhere.

The lack of facilities and staff will undoubtedly cause an increase in wait times for patients, which can exacerbate medical conditions and directly cause permanent injury or deaths that would otherwise have been avoided.

National Nurses United, the union which represents nurses at Cook County hospitals, has not made a statement in response to the mass layoffs of nurses. This is in spite of the fact that nurses have been without a contract since 2008. A strike vote was approved by 85 percent of nurses in late December 2010 in response to plans to reduce emergency services at county facilities.

Preckwinkle conceded that the Public Defender's Office could cut its budget by 10 percent rather than 16 percent after the Public Defender warned that budget cuts would threaten the office's ability to provide its constitutionally-mandated services.

According to a report in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Public Defender Abishi Cunningham, Jr. sent the following letter to his staff in response: "I wish to make clear that we never stated, in any fashion, that this [o]ffice could continue to perform its constitutional duties to the increasing number of residents below the poverty line in Cook County with a 10 % cut in the 2010 budget. To the contrary, we have made it clear that we do not believe we can continue to provide effective assistance of counsel with such a dramatic cut to our [o]ffice."

Cuts like these are a direct attack on the ability of the working class to receive legally mandated representation in court and will no doubt result in increased instances of wrongful conviction and lengthy incarceration times.

Also to be cut by 10 percent is the budget for the

© World Socialist Web Site

State's Attorney, which is to shed 100 administrative positions and 25 attorneys. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, a deal was also reached with the State's Attorney, Anita Alvarez, to coordinate with county departments to "aggressively litigate" claims of worker's compensation fraud in order to save money.

Other county departments laying off workers include the Cook County Assessor's Office, which will shed 60 jobs, and the Circuit Court Clerk's Office, which will cut 170. The Treasurer plans to lay off 34 workers.

Budget cuts to the Sheriff's Office will exacerbate the horrific conditions to which prisoners are subjected in Cook County Jail, the nation's largest county jail and subject of a 17-month Justice Department investigation in 2007 and 2008. Overcapacity and understaffing were cited as major contributors to what were considered to be "unconstitutional living conditions."

Preckwinkle, in a show of mock solidarity with laid-off workers, said that it is "very painful to me... to put so many people out on the street" and took a symbolic 10 percent cut to her undisclosed salary. If it is anything like former Cook County President Todd Stroger's $170,000 per year, such an income would still be several times that of the average worker. Preckwinkle also did not address directly the incomes of the 120 highest paid, politically-connected county employees, which added together is approximately the same amount as the entire budget of the CCDPH.

Toni Preckwinkle's right-wing political sentiments are in line with those of the Democratic Party as a whole. Phrases like "out of control spending" and "it's not enough to simply cut the government, we have to rethink the way it works," echoed in the campaign slogans of Rahm Emanuel, the recently-elected mayor of Chicago. Savage cuts are being ordered at the state level, also controlled by Democrats.

The authors also recommends:

Chicago: "Life-threatening deficiencies" found in largest US jail
[23 July 2008]

Chicago hospital emergency rooms strained by uninsured patients, budget cuts
[8 January 2010]

Report documents widening US health disparities and inequality
[21 January 2011

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site