

Illinois to close mental health facilities, lay off 1,900

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At a September 8 press conference, Democratic Governor Pat Quinn announced that Illinois would be closing three mental health facilities located in Rockford, Chester, and the Chicago suburb of Tinley Park. Also to be shuttered are two downstate centers for the developmentally disabled in Mabley and Jacksonville. The Logan Correctional Center and Murphysboro Youth Correctional Center were also identified for closure.

Quinn claims that the fiscal year 2012 budget passed by the Illinois Assembly, which he signed June 30, does not contain adequate funding for the targeted state agencies, necessitating cuts of \$313 million. He warned that if the facilities were not shuttered, Illinois would run out of money by next spring.

The closure of these facilities is part of ongoing attacks on social spending in the state, spearheaded by the Democratic Party. The cuts will generate an estimated cost savings of \$54.8 million, barely a drop in the bucket in terms of the state's \$8.3 billion debt load. Illinois has the largest budget deficit of any state relative to its revenues.

After the closure plans are submitted to state legislative panels, the state could begin laying off 1,938 workers starting in November. This will exacerbate an already poor job situation for Illinois workers.

Unemployment in the state for July was 9.5 percent, slightly worse than the national average. In August, companies operating throughout the state, including Lowe's, Morse Calipers, and Chicago Restaurant Partners, announced large layoffs. According to the Illinois Policy Institute, the state lost more jobs in July than any other state in the nation, citing federal labor data indicating a loss of 24,900 non-farm payroll jobs over the month. In June, the state shed 7,200 jobs.

Ben Wolf, a lawyer with the Illinois ACLU who has worked on cases involving the disabled, told the Associated Press, "Those of us who lived through the

deinstitutionalization of the '70s and '80s are terrified people will be abandoned."

Several advocacy groups for the developmentally disabled, including Arc of Illinois and Equip for Equality, took Quinn's announcement as a positive step towards the movement of people currently in large state facilities to community group home settings. In actuality, it signals a callous abandonment of some of the most vulnerable sections of the population.

The closure of mental health facilities comes on the heels of changes to Illinois' Medicaid program that limits the availability of certain psychiatric medications. Estimated to save \$90 million in Medicaid spending, the changes require doctors to explain why patients might need any of the 17 name-brand medications now on a "non-preferred" list.

These new requirements have the potential to cause serious problems for patients. A letter to the state from a provider quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* noted that "many patients are now at risk for serious metabolic problems since the antipsychotics now approved by Medicaid are the ones identified as having the greatest risks for causing diabetes, increased cholesterol, etc."

Sheri, a student and worker in the medical field, spoke to the WSWs about cuts to prescription drug coverage. Noting that many people could hardly pay for their other necessities, she said, "One person I have has to decide between medicine and eating."

The closure of the correctional facilities will exacerbate the already overcrowded and terrible conditions facing people incarcerated in Illinois prisons. According to an Associated Press report, the state prison system holds 74 percent more prisoners than the capacity the facilities were originally intended to hold. The elimination of the Logan Correctional Center and the transfer of its nearly 2,000 prisoners to other locations would put the system at 90 percent over capacity.

On the same day of his announcements, Quinn won a victory in federal district court against the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), when Judge Sue Myerscough issued a ruling upholding the governor's earlier decision to cancel contractually-obligated pay raises for 30,000 state employees. That move was intended to eliminate \$75 million from the current shortfall.

Judge Myerscough's ruling exemplifies the way in which the courts are being used as a battering ram in the campaign for fiscal austerity across the country. In her decision, Myerscough wrote that the "AFSCME-represented employees' inability to get raises, while significant, is eclipsed by the potential harm the State would suffer if a total lack of funds were to befall it." Later, she writes: "Given the state's budget crisis—a situation so dire that both parties agree the state will run out of money before the fiscal year ends—the pay freeze certainly promotes a cost-containment. Since cost-containment is a legitimate governmental interest, and cost-containment is logically aided by the wage freeze, the wage freeze survives."

Quinn's pay freeze also broke a written agreement he had made with AFSCME to postpone the raises in exchange for a promise of no layoffs or facility closures before June 2012. That deal was concluded just before last year's election, in which AFSCME donated \$225,000 to Quinn's general election campaign. Having backed the Democrats, and knowing that they would enact cuts that would fall on their members, AFSCME's response to the pay freeze, closures, and layoffs has been to file legal challenges to dissipate the anger of rank-and-file workers.

While announcing the cuts, Quinn implied that the worst of these devastating cuts, and presumably the nearly \$183 million in cuts he has yet to announce, could be avoided if only the Assembly would uphold his amendatory vetoes to the budget bill. These vetoes, amounting to \$376 million, he suggests could be reallocated to keep the facilities open. Though this seems unlikely to occur, as Assembly leaders have indicated any cuts would go towards reducing the state's long-standing backlog of bills, it is worth noting what the \$376 million in cuts would entail.

Those \$376 million in amendatory veto cuts included \$276 million in Medicaid spending, \$89 million in school transportation spending, and \$11 million for regional school superintendents' offices. The Medicaid spending cuts would come primarily in the form of reductions in the rates paid to service providers for procedures, while

the school transportation spending cuts would impact school buses.

Many of these cuts have already been in effect since July 1; regional superintendents have been working without pay since then in the hope that their positions will be restored in the upcoming legislative session through a veto override.

Whatever the final configuration of the cuts, they will only be the beginning. According to *Bloomberg* news, the budget session that ended June 1 left an estimated \$6.2 billion in unpaid bills, which the state is currently dealing with through delayed payments to service providers. With financial markets indicating an unwillingness to lend the state such a large sum and essentially demanding cuts, the legislators in the Illinois Assembly, Republican and Democrat alike, have embraced this new imperative.

The needs of the working class in Illinois are represented nowhere in these budget negotiations. The primary question concerning the political establishment is not whether there should be cuts to social services, but how large the cuts should be and upon which group they should fall the hardest.

The Democrats have not suggested taxing the state's billionaires, nor even proposed reducing the amount given to corporations in the form of tax breaks or other incentives. Indeed, the Democrats are at the forefront of the assault on workers in Illinois and throughout the country.

Already in 2011, \$230 million has been doled out, with Motorola Mobility—targeted for acquisition by Google—receiving \$100 million. Other recent recipients of state money have included Chrysler, with \$62.1 million worth of incentives, and Navistar, with \$64.7 million.



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