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OUR OPINION

Illinois lawmakers must act responsibly now in best interests of state

THE ILLINOIS General Assembly has taken two important steps to begin resolving the state's budget crisis. In votes cast last week, lawmakers agreed to stop providing free health insurance for state retirees and rejected a proposal to limit the governor's authority to close state facilities.

Implementing those cost-control measures will have painful consequences for the state's retirees and, in the case of facilities that the governor may close, for many state workers and the communities in which they live.

Such consequences, however, can no longer be avoided if lawmakers do what must be done — act decisively, now, to restore and rebuild Illinois' financial integrity.

We commend Rep. Jil Tracy, R-Quincy, who joined 73 other House members in supporting the measure that ends free health care for state retirees. This could not have been an easy decision, but the time for easy decisions is past. Illinois can no longer afford for its lawmakers and state leaders to make comfortable choices that voters may prefer but that are not in the best interests of the state. Those kinds of decisions led to this crisis.

Retiree health care benefits now cost the state about $800 million annually, and this legislation, which goes into effect July 1, will begin to bring that expense under control. It is important to note that retiree premiums will be based on earnings and subject to negotiations with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and the approval of a legislative oversight panel.

In another important cost-control move, the Illinois Senate defeated legislation that would prohibit the governor from closing state facilities without legislative approval. Gov. Pat Quinn has proposed closing 14 state facilities, including prisons, halfway houses and mental health facilities. The closures would save an estimated $100 million annually, in part by eliminating more than 2,000 state jobs. The Senate proposal, which did not advance to the House, would have made it virtually impossible for the governor to move forward with the closings, crippling efforts to rein in state spending.

The sponsor of the legislation, Sen. Gary Forby, D-Benton, said such decisions should not be made by the governor alone. And while there is merit to that principle, the depth of the state's financial crisis requires that the governor be given a high degree of flexibility to deal in a timely manner with what is an unprecedented financial emergency.

The closures, like the changes in retiree health premiums, will have painful consequences for state employees, their families and the communities in which they live and work. Still, lawmakers have no choice except to squarely face what Quinn has called the state's "rendezvous with reality," and deal substantively with problems caused by the negligence and foot-dragging of past decades.

Sen. John Sullivan, D-Rushville, and Sen. Sam McCann, R-Carlinville, in their votes rejected these two efforts to control state spending. Having done so they must take advantage of opportunities to support other solutions as the legislative session moves forward.

Sullivan and McCann were among 20 senators who voted against the bill to end free health insurance for retirees. They were among 23 senators who supported the legislation to ban the governor from closing state facilities.

In the House, Rep. Norine Hammond, R-Macomb, and Rep. Jim Watson, R-Jacksonville, also opposed the legislation to end free health insurance for retirees.

More difficult decisions lie ahead, as lawmakers act on proposals to address the long-standing need for pension and medicaid reforms. Costs for these programs are soaring at unsustainable rates and will consume 50 percent of general revenue spending in fiscal 2013.

With respect to Medicaid, the governor is proposing $1.4 billion in cuts and efficiencies impacting 58 benefit areas; $675 million in cuts to healthcare providers, and $1-a-pack hike in the cigarette tax to generate revenue that will forestall further Medicaid cuts. With respect to pension costs, the governor is proposing sweeping reforms that include a 3 percent increase in employee contributions; a reduction and delays in cost-of living adjustments; gradually raising the retirement age to 67, and shifting some pension costs to school districts, community colleges and public universities, and other measures.

While there may be legitimate reasons to oppose some of the elements of the governor's proposals, those who do so have an obligation to suggest viable alternatives.

Lawmakers who say "no" to the governor's proposals must identify other solutions of equal scope and feasibility if Illinois is to avoid sliding further into a financial abyss from which it will be more difficult and more costly to recover.

The harsh and unavoidable reality is that there will be no solution to the state's deep financial problems without significant sacrifice. That burden can and should be balanced to assure that it is fair and reasonable, but cannot be simply discarded or reduced to a level that falls short of solving the state's serious financial problems.

Those who fail to act responsibly now in the best interests of the state must be prepared to accept responsibility for the far more dire consequences and sacrifice that will follow.

AS THEY SEE IT

The virtues of grunt work

OCCASIONALLY A really bad idea gains currency and credibility. Here's one: College students who work at unpaid internships are unfairly exploited by money-grubbing capitalists. In fact, goes this argument, the whole system is not only immoral but probably illegal and should be abolished.

In his book "Intern Nation," Ross Perlin garnered a lot of attention with the allegation that internships are a "labor racket." The New York Times recently ran a front-page story that tilted heavily in a left-leaning, anti-intern direction. One intern at a Manhattan talent agency described his experience as "basically three wasted months." Another actually sued Harper's Bazaar magazine because her assignment included "real grunt work, lugging things around."

Cokie & Steve Roberts

Cokie is a political commentator for ABC News and a senior news analyst for National Public Radio. Steve appears on CNN, PBS and the ABC Radio network and hosts Voice of America's "The Roberts Report"

We have some advice for students graduating this month or returning to school next fall: Don't listen to such whiny, self-indulgent claptrap. Internships can teach invaluable lessons. Most entry-level jobs include "real grunt work," and there's nothing wrong with starting at the bottom. They also place a high premium on energy and initiative, and if you waste three months, it's probably your own fault.

Moreover, internships are by far the best way to get a full-time job, and we say that based on a fair amount of experience. Cokie has mothered and mentored a generation of young people at ABC and NPR. Steve has taught at George Washington University for more than 20 years and has counseled hundreds of students. One of them, Heather Clapp Date, interned at CNN during her senior year and was hired before she even graduated.

"My internship experiences," she says, "confirmed my career interests, helped me build a professional network of industry contacts, and eventually led to my first post-college job and more jobs after that."

The system is far from perfect. Some bosses don't understand their obligations, assigning interns to make coffee and copies without ever including and instructing their young charges. More seriously, students who pay their own bills often cannot afford unpaid internships, so the kids with rich parents get yet another leg up.

It certainly would be fairer if more employers paid their interns. Failing that, colleges should try to help needy students take advantage of these opportunities. Even a grant of $2,000 or $3,000 can buy a semester of freedom from waiting tables or stamping library books. Steve's department at George Washington uses a generous gift from CNN's Larry King to do exactly that.

But just because a system is flawed does not make it a failure. Many new job seekers encounter bosses who say, "We cannot hire you because you don't have experience." And of course the applicants reply, "How can I get experience if you won't hire me?"

The way to crack open that circle of frustration is through internships. Listen to another of Steve's former students, Molly Wade: "Without my internship, I probably would have had to move back in with my parents after college. Instead, I had five semesters of professional experience on my resume and a network of people to call on as graduation approached. One of those people hired me, and three years later, I manage the marketing and communications for the Trust for the National Mall."

Brooke Miller took an internship in the publicity department of a Washington-based theater company. "It wasn't always glamorous," she says. "I spent my fair share of time in the copy room, but I learned a lot about what a publicist does."

Miller also made friends and contacts. "When I saw a publicity job posting at another theater, I went to one of my supervisors, and he immediately reached out to the person doing the hiring since they were friendly." A week later, she had the job.

Internships often teach the value of working hard, paying attention and taking a chance. "Like most things in life," says Heather Date, "I believe an internship experience is what you make of it." Amanda Lilly was working at an economics newsletter last summer when its social media director suddenly took sick. Lilly volunteered to manage the company's Twitter account in his absence, and when the director retired, Lilly was in position to seize a "golden opportunity." Her internship ended on a Friday, and her job began on Monday.

Employers hire interns because it saves time and money when they don't have to advertise a job or plow through a stack of resumes. Besides, interns are already trained and tested.

"An internship benefits both the organization and the intern," says Jacqui Corba, who is finishing a stint at CBS. "It's a win-win."

She's smart. Hire that young woman!

Letters are welcome

The Herald-Whig welcomes letters about issues or events of general interest.
Guidelines for letter writers are:

- Letters of no more than 400 words are preferred.
- Letters must be signed and include the writer's address and telephone number for purposes of verification.
- Letters that are unreasoned, libelous or that deal in personalities or personal disputes are not accepted.

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