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## Human services hammered in budget mess

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As Illinois' budget crisis worsens and the state lags further behind in paying bills, those that serve the state's neediest are being forced to make dire decisions and at-times heroic sacrifices to pick up the slack.

"The burden of survival for human services has been passed to our dedicated staff," said Gretchen Vapnar, executive director of the Community Crisis Center in Elgin, which relies on Illinois for half of its funding. It maxed out a line of credit this year while waiting for funding, leaving employees to take a month of unpaid leave.

Illinois ranks first nationwide when it comes to nonprofit groups reporting late payments from the government, according to a survey last year by the nonpartisan Urban Institute. More than 80 percent of Illinois groups say their money doesn't come on time.

An analysis of state data by the Associated Press found that the backlog amounted to more than 31,000 bills totaling \$425 million. The Department of Human Services, for instance, had \$105.4 million in bills that were more than a month old as of early September. They ranged from grants to nonprofit groups to food to burial expenses.

In a statement the agency said late payments are "of concern, but vendors have generally been patient and understanding during these tough economic times ... the department's delivery of direct services have not been impacted to date."

Groups statewide disagreed, especially at a time when the need is increasing. More than 14 percent of Illinois' population lives in poverty, the highest rate since 1992.

"The people who need services are getting less, which leaves a greater and greater amount of unmet need," said Gina Guillemette, a committee member of the umbrella group Illinois Partners for Human Service.

Illinois officials approved a budget this year that, despite an income tax increase, continues to allow the backlog of unpaid bills to continue into next year.

The South East Alcohol and Drug Abuse Center in Chicago is owed \$54,000 by the state and has faced cuts, leading to the end of a program for adolescents battling addiction.

"I sweat payroll every other week," said executive director Greg Zyvert. "I have to play God, in this bill gets paid, that bill doesn't."

He says they've considered closing altogether.

The unpaid bills are trickling down to services. Two case managers who recently left the Chicago-based Inspiration Corporation — which has helped more than 200 people get off the streets — saying they couldn't

work there with such a shaky financial situation. That meant the remaining managers more than doubled their caseloads.

The Family Service & Community Mental Health Center for McHenry County, which has served thousands of northern Illinois families, got an advance from a county board to cover bills, in addition to 3 percent pay cuts in the last fiscal year, unpaid furlough days and fewer holidays. The agency is owed almost \$500,000.

“They’ve had to step in where the state has stepped away,” said CEO Lori Nelson. “It’s unconscionable.”

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