



Opinion

What's gone on with Illinois state government in Springfield for the last year certainly qualifies as a reboot, but not the kind we envisioned when this website debuted in November 2012.

Never in our institutional memory, which is longer than **we'd like to admit**, has Illinois government been in a greater state of financial and functional disarray than it is today.

On the financial side, we have a state blindly spending at a rate that far outpaces what **it's taking in**. **Our leaders have known for eight months now that there's no getting out of a \$111 billion long-term pension obligation, yet they've done nothing to address it.** The 25 percent income tax rate reduction that arrived a year ago was celebrated in some corners, but is sure to be wiped away by the mammoth [budget deficit and unpaid bills](#) now accruing.

Functionally, where do we begin? Just this week we've learned that:

- The state, because it has no budget, is [on the verge of non-compliance](#) with court-ordered standards for care of the developmentally disabled

- Hundreds of elderly Illinoisans who have avoided nursing homes because state-subsidized caregivers help them stay in their homes are [about to lose those caregivers](#)
- The state has [withdrawn financial aid](#) promised to 125,000 low-income college students this academic year, jeopardizing their college careers and in many cases forcing students to take on more debt to stay in school
- General Electric [took Illinois' government dysfunction into account](#) when rejecting Chicago as its new corporate headquarters

The harm being inflicted by the budget standoff is too vast to itemize. (We've created a [map](#) to record other examples as we find them, though it's far from inclusive.)

Gov. Bruce Rauner has said all this is short-term pain that will lead to long-term gain in **the form of business and legal reforms he believes are necessary to revitalize Illinois' job market**. House Speaker Michael Madigan says those reforms will diminish the standard of living **of the middle class and aren't related to the budget**.

At one time, I believed both sides had valid points. But more than six months into this deadlock, the pain no longer is short-term. College students who drop out because they lost financial assistance may never re-enroll. Elderly people who must move into nursing homes may have no home to return to if caregiver funding ever is restored.

Both sides have found very effective arguments for blaming the other, but no one involved in prolonging this crisis is helping the middle class.

A perfect example of this problem played out Wednesday in Springfield. Three Democratic senators [introduced a bill](#) to restore \$168 million in Monetary Award Program funding for low-income college students. Some 125,000 students had been promised MAP grants averaging \$2,700 each before the school year, but the budget standoff meant the money never arrived. Sen. Pat McGuire, D-Joliet, said officials from City Colleges of Chicago said the school had lost 1,200 students between the fall and spring semesters because their MAP funding had not arrived.

The governor's office responded in a [letter](#) that said the administration “stands ready to work with any member of the General Assembly who wants to find a sensible and responsible way to fund MAP and higher education without triggering a cash flow crisis by tying such funding to spending reductions in other areas of GRF or one of many cost-saving reforms.”

The letter contained a list of eight examples of excessive and/or questionable spending by public colleges and universities — mostly dealing with administrator pay, golden parachutes and expensive perks — that might be curbed through legislation to offset MAP costs.

Interestingly, the Senate Democrats in early 2015 compiled an [extensive report](#) detailing those very excesses at Illinois colleges. Sen. Bill Cunningham, D-Chicago, said there are “four or five bills pending” in the legislative session that started this week dealing with the abuses found in the report.

“While higher education warrants a review and potentially reform, as just about every aspect of state government would seem to, we can't throw 125,000 students overboard,” McGuire said.

The prospect of “long-term gain” is meaningless to a college student who'll miss the coming semester because he/she had a promised state grant snatched away. The very concept of long-term gain is a cruel hoax if the end result is a state with universities irreparably damaged by an extended state funding drought and thousands of young people who have given up hope on attending college.

The same applies if this is allowed to happen in the interest of protecting the standard of living of the middle class. Many MAP recipients need college aid because they aspire to **get into** the middle class.

Rauner on Jan. 27 will deliver his second State of the State Address. If the MAP situation stays as it is today, an awful lot of young adults in Illinois will be a week or so into what would have been their spring semester as Rauner speaks in Springfield.

For them and the thousands of other Illinoisans affected directly and immediately by the Illinois budget crisis, this is no abstract exercise in political theory.

Are you or someone close to you affected adversely by the state's budget impasse? Use our Sound Off tool to send your story with a single click to Gov. Bruce Rauner, the four leaders of the General Assembly and your state representative and senator. [Click here to get started.](#)

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