

Short-Changing Illinoisans is Short-Sighted and Short on Humanity

By Dawn Dalton and Sharmili Majmudar

Chris was raped by a friend. Kiran was degraded and humiliated at home every night after work. Mischelle is living a life filled with violence and shame. Maria was beaten in front of her children by their father. Stories like these are all too common.

These survivors were assisted by the sexual assault and domestic violence agencies across Chicago and Illinois. They received counseling, legal advocacy, shelter and support in escaping the violence in their lives. Because of this, they no longer are trapped by abuse, but have found healing, safety and justice.

On May 31, our state legislators passed a budget that decimated the infrastructure of human services throughout the state.

Due to this action, agencies have laid off staff, closed offices in already underserved communities and cut services because of the 60%-100% cuts they received in contracts from the state. Domestic violence shelters closed and rape crisis centers operated at service levels as if it were 1979 as opposed to 2009. When the option was put for a tax increase versus meeting the needs of Illinois constituents, a vote was taken and decisions were made. Human needs are not important to our General Assembly.

One has to wonder: when we are living in an economic climate that is leaving more people in need of human services, why would our state legislators make a choice to put human services first up on the chopping block when they are the services that are depended on by so many of their constituents? Right now every budget is being downsized, from local government to large corporations to small nonprofit organizations. Difficult decisions are being made and cuts are inevitable.

These are the realities with which we are living.

However, a budget reflects what is important to the body that governs it. So, if our state budget allows for half of our human needs to be met, how does that reflect what we voted for when we went to the polls? What does it say about their values when elected officials put future ambitions above immediate need? How will it impact your vote when you go to the polls the next time to cast your vote?

And, don't be fooled about the capacity of private philanthropy to carry the load that the state legislators have refused to pick up. Laura Thrall, CEO of United Way of Metropolitan Chicago reminds us that there is approximately \$200 million available from private sources which is not nearly enough to fill the gap for human service organizations. Government has a particular role in ensuring the health and safety of its citizens -- this is not time to pretend we can pass the buck without dire consequences.

We all know someone who has benefited from human services, including rape crisis and domestic violence. But more importantly, we are your daughters and sons, your friends and neighbors, your family and community. We are Mischelle, the woman on your block who is facing her abusive partner with courage and making a plan for her and her children's safety. We are Chris, who was raped by a friend and is in the emergency room, shaken and brave. We are Kiran; we are Maria.

The tax increase will be up for vote again as early as January. We need our legislators to show the courage that Mischelle and Chris and Kiran and Maria and countless others do every day; we need our legislators to meet the needs of Illinois' citizens, now more than ever. Because a bad budget doesn't just cost services and jobs; it costs lives.

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