

Quinn makes idle threats to close facilities

By Jim Nowlan

Gov. Pat Quinn has threatened in a press conference to close seven Illinois state facilities, including two prisons and centers for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled. The facilities won't ultimately be closed because there is no place for the wrongdoers, ill and infirm to go.

Yet these people have become pawns in a budget controversy that pits Quinn against the legislature, doctors and hospitals, state employee unions and probably the federal courts.

There has to be a better way to resolve conflict than governing by press conference.

The background is this. Prior to the 2010 elections, which he won very narrowly, Gov. Quinn inked a pact with pleased state employee unions that promised no layoffs if he were elected. This was to go along with contractual pay increases negotiated earlier to go in effect in 2011.

This spring the Illinois House, with support from both Democrats and Republicans, crafted a budget that severely cut several state agencies on the premise that lawmakers would budget no more dollars than the revenues projected to come in during the year.

The budget provided much less than Quinn had requested and induced him to spurn the pay increases and no layoff pledge and then to threaten the facility closures.

Quinn also imposed reduction vetoes in the budget bill that would reduce spending for medical care by about \$300 million. “Accept my reductions and I won’t close the facilities,” says Quinn.

But the reductions would come from payments to hospitals and doctors, who claim they are already woefully underpaid for their services. And they have strong support in the legislature, especially from Republican lawmakers who were otherwise pleased with the overall budget cutting.

Budgeting is about the politics of who gets what. And nobody wants less. Further, state government budgeting is largely about providing services to people—school kids, college students, foster children, the ill, infirm, prisoners. I figure that about 5-6 million of the state’s 12-plus million residents receive state services of one kind or another and often more than one service per person.

In the past decade the legislature and governor simply budgeted what they felt needed to be spent, without worrying about how much was coming in via taxes. As a result, Illinois overspent by about \$3 billion a year and went deep into debt.

So the income tax was increased to cover the annual over-spending and maybe start to whittle down the backlog of bills. Even with the new tax money, the budget is tight.

Yet few lawmakers and citizens are willing to throw disabled children and adults onto the streets, and prisons are already significantly overcrowded. Shoe-horning more inmates into fewer prisons would probably invite a federal lawsuit that would claim inmates are being denied basic human rights. A recent federal court decision in California is, for example, forcing that state to find more room for its prisoners.

Some day the state institutions for the developmentally disabled may be closed, with the residents transferred to community-based facilities, but I don't think the communities are ready for the residents just yet.

The likely result of the present contretemps between governor and lawmakers and interest groups will be adjustments in the budget to allow the threatened institutions to continue operating, but without funding for pay increases to state employees. The employee unions will fight out that contractual issue in court.

A better approach than government by press conference would be for the governor and legislative leaders to sit down and hash out the actual problems between a legislative budget that may have been too austere for certain agencies and a governor who was overly generous in his commitments before the election.