

Op-Ed
Human Service Investments Make Fiscal Sense

To the Editors,

While granted a small reprieve for fiscal year 2015, human service programs across the state will once again face significant cuts in the state budget as Illinois rightly tries to put its fiscal house in order. Yet critical services to at-risk populations hang in the balance, as do long-term repercussions for the state's economy. The decisions made by state leaders over the next few months on details of human service policy and funding will have an impact on our future economic health as surely as unfunded pensions do today.

As a society, we invest in human services—education, health, job training, child care—to ensure a basic quality of life for our most vulnerable citizens, and to improve the economic future of our families and our state. The first we do to help those most in need in our communities, the second we do as an investment with genuine return on investment for the future. Early education is an area where most people fundamentally understand that funding for preschool and early learning pays off handsomely down the line for our youth. All of society benefits.

Yet “early intervention” to avoid cascading negative consequences applies to far more than pre-school. Targeted services to help the elderly or disabled stay in their homes are far less expensive to society than institutionalization. Access to preventative health services and screenings is much less costly than dealing with untreated and full-blown health episodes. Providing after-school programs to at-risk youth is a small price to pay when weighed against the alternatives, including the astronomical costs of incarceration. These investments provide a moral dividend that is obvious, and an economic one we risk jettisoning without thoughtful decision-making.

We realize government cannot, and should not, fulfill our human service infrastructure needs alone. Sustaining quality and efficient human services in our state will require a collaborative effort among government, civic and private sectors, but private philanthropy can never play the primary role financially that the government plays.

State leaders have human services expertise available to them, including United Way's significant experience working with partners to focus and leverage resources. With an emphasis on prevention, integration of services, and measurable and meaningful outcomes, we and others in the nonprofit sector look forward to working with state leaders to effectively balance budget requirements and human needs.



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