

Illinois to invest more than \$23 million in abortion access, reproductive healthcare initiatives

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As another of Illinois' border states is set to enact a near-total abortion ban this week, Gov. JB Pritzker on Monday announced several new programs to help address the influx of out-of-state abortion seekers the state has seen in the 13 months since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

On Tuesday, Indiana will join Missouri and Kentucky in its near-total ban on the procedure, while court battles are ongoing over Republican attempts to restrict abortion in Iowa and Wisconsin. Pritzker said Illinois Democrats had been preparing for such a reality even before last summer's landmark Supreme Court decision.

"While our neighboring states revert to forcing back-alley abortions, Illinois will remain a safe haven for women," Pritzker said Monday at an event in Chicago announcing the investments. "And I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure widespread equitable access to reproductive rights."

To expand Illinois' capacity to care for the sharp increase in abortion-seekers, the state's Department of Public Health will spend \$10 million to create a hotline to aid callers in finding providers and making appointments. Pritzker had proposed the funding in February, and Democratic lawmakers included it in the state's fiscal year 2024 budget this spring. The hotline is in its beginning stages as IDPH puts out a request for proposals.

The state's spending plan also included \$8 million in additional training for reproductive health care providers and a specialty consultation program for at-risk patients.

And on Monday, Pritzker said the state's Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity will open a \$5 million grant program for reproductive health care providers in Illinois. That money comes from the non-transportation portion of Illinois' \$45 billion infrastructure program, Rebuild Illinois. It can be spent on improvements, repairs, new construction, security upgrades and equipment, including vehicles that can be turned into mobile care units.

Additionally, Pritzker announced a new collaborative

meant to help patients who need more complex reproductive health care. The state's Department of Healthcare and Family Services, along with IDPH, will join the University of Illinois at Chicago hospital, Rush University Medical Center and the Chicago Abortion Fund to launch a hotline aimed at these high-risk patients next month.

The hotline, dubbed the Complex Abortion Regional Line for Access, or CARLA, will be staffed by nurses who will aid patients through scheduling appointments within hospital systems and getting set up with any required pre-operative testing. Additionally, CARLA's partnership with the Chicago Abortion Fund will help patients with funding for reproductive health services, plus any transportation and child care costs while getting and recovering from treatment.

Chicago Abortion Fund Executive Director Megan Jeyifo said her organization has seen an influx of patients who need complex abortion care as GOP-controlled states have clamped down on access to the procedure. In the last 13 months, Jeyifo said CAF has supported more than 250 abortion seekers who needed hospital care – up from 26 the prior year.

CARLA's startup costs for the first year come from \$600,000 that IDHFS already had in its budget, according to a spokesperson for Pritzker.

Also on Monday, the governor announced the creation of a family planning program for Medicaid recipients that will cover services including annual preventative exams, family planning counseling, basic infertility counseling, screenings for cancers related to reproductive organs and all FDA-approved methods of contraception, tubal ligation, vasectomies and abortion. Pritzker also announced the state would reimburse travel costs for state employees and dependents who live out of state but seek abortion care in Illinois. The program is modeled after an existing state program for organ donation and adoption, according to the governor's office.

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CABOT TUSCOLA DONATED \$500 to the Arcola Food Bank. The Food Bank is open Thursdays from 12 noon to 2 p.m. and 3–5 p.m. If you would like to assist those in need, consider volunteering at Arcola Food Bank, make a donation (check/cash), and/or donate fruits and vegetables from your garden. Kim Murphy, North American FMO technical manager, provided the donation on behalf of Cabot to the Arcola Food Bank. Pictured from left are Mike Arthur, Greg Saunders, Jeff Saunders, Barb Adams, Phillip Morgan, Janice Gee, Shelia Sentel, Darlene Budd, Bob Maxwell, Eric Plummer, and Kim Murphy. Submitted photo.

CDC: Leprosy on the rise in Florida, elsewhere

Cases of the bacterial disease, leprosy, have more than doubled in the southeastern U.S. in the last decade, with a bulk of the cases in Florida according to a research letter in the journal Emerging Infectious Diseases.

The letter published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, says Central Florida accounted for 81% of cases reported in Florida and almost one-fifth of cases reported across the U.S. According to the National Hansen's Disease Program, 159 new cases were reported in the U.S. in 2020.

CDC has not issued a travel advisory for Florida, or any other state, due to Hansen's disease (leprosy).

Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, is very rare in the United States, with less than 200 cases reported per year. Most people with Hansen's disease in the U.S. became infected in a country where it is more common. In the past, leprosy was feared as a highly contagious, devastating disease, but now we know that it's hard to spread and it's easily treatable.

Hansen's disease does not spread easily from person to person. You cannot get leprosy through casual contact such as shaking hands, sitting next to, or talking to someone who has

the disease.

Prolonged, close contact with someone with untreated Hansen's disease over many months is needed to become infected. Around 95% of all people cannot be infected because they are naturally immune.

Leprosy can be cured with antibiotic treatment. Once someone starts treatment for Hansen's disease, they can no longer spread the disease to other people.

CDC and the National Hansen's Disease Program (NHDP) are continuously monitoring for exposures of all reported cases.

Hansen's disease (also known as leprosy) is an infection caused by slow-growing bacteria called Mycobacterium leprae. It can affect the nerves, skin, eyes, and lining of the nose (nasal mucosa). With early diagnosis and treatment, the disease can be cured. People with Hansen's disease can continue to work and lead an active life during and after treatment.

Leprosy was once feared as a highly contagious and devastating disease, but now we know it doesn't spread easily and treatment is very effective. However, if left untreated, the nerve damage can result in crippling of hands and feet, paralysis, and blindness.

Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms mainly affect the skin, nerves, and mucous membranes (the soft, moist areas just inside the body's openings).

The disease can cause skin symptoms such as:

- Discolored patches of skin, usually flat, that may be numb and look faded (lighter than the skin around)
- Growths (nodules) on the skin
- Thick, stiff or dry skin
- Painless ulcers on the soles of feet
- Painless swelling or lumps on the face or earlobes
- Loss of eyebrows or eyelashes

Symptoms caused by damage to the nerves are:

- Numbness of affected areas of the skin
- Muscle weakness or paralysis (especially in the hands and feet)
- Enlarged nerves (especially those around the elbow and knee and in the sides of the neck)
- Eye problems that may lead to blindness (when facial nerves are affected)
- Enlarged nerves below the skin and dark reddish skin patch overlying the nerves affected by the bacteria on the chest of a patient with Hansen's disease. This skin patch

was numb when touched.

- Enlarged nerves below the skin and dark reddish skin patch overlying the nerves affected by the bacteria on the chest of a patient with Hansen's disease. This skin patch was numb when touched.

Symptoms caused by the disease in the mucous membranes are:

- A stuffy nose
- Nosebleeds
- Since Hansen's disease affects the nerves, loss of feeling or sensation can occur. When loss of sensation occurs, injuries such as burns may go unnoticed. Because you may not feel the pain that can warn you of harm to your body, take extra caution to ensure the affected parts of your body are not injured.

If left untreated, the signs of advanced leprosy can include:

- Paralysis and crippling of hands and feet
- Shortening of toes and fingers due to reabsorption
- Chronic non-healing ulcers on the bottoms of the feet
- Blindness
- Loss of eyebrows
- Nose disfigurement
- Other complications that may sometimes occur are:
- Painful or tender nerves
- Redness and pain around the affected area
- Burning sensation in the skin

State watchdog investigating employees accused of bilking federal pandemic aid program

Nationwide, about 17% of \$1.2 trillion in small business pandemic relief grants were fraudulent

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Dozens of state employees across multiple agencies are under investigation by a state watchdog for claims they fraudulently obtained payments from a federal pandemic-era loan program, Capitol News Illinois has learned.

Neil Olson, general counsel at the Illinois Office of the Executive Inspector General, confirmed that "OEIG has been investigating allegations of Paycheck Protection Program fraud by state employees under our jurisdiction." The review, he said, is "systematic," involving multiple state agencies and the other governing bodies under OEIG's jurisdiction, which include state universities, boards and commissions, and regional transit boards.

Congress intended for the loans issued by the U.S. Small Business Administration, most of which were later forgiven, to keep small businesses afloat

and their employees on the payroll as COVID-19 resulted in lockdowns and interrupted commerce.

Fraud in the PPP program has been widespread across the United States. In a June report, the inspector general for the SBA estimated that the agency paid out more than \$200 billion in "potentially fraudulent" aid during the pandemic – about 17 percent of the \$1.2 trillion that was dispersed through the PPP and other similar programs.

In the rush to swiftly disburse funds, the federal agency "weakened or removed the controls necessary to prevent fraudsters from easily gaining access to these programs," the report stated. "The allure of 'easy money' in this pay and chase environment attracted an overwhelming number of fraudsters to the programs."

The OEIG typically does not comment on ongoing investigations, and Olson declined to say how many employees could face disciplinary action

– up to and including termination – as a result of the widespread probe or provide any additional details.

The scandal has ensnared numerous employees who work at the Illinois Department of Human Services, including at state-run facilities for people with disabilities that are facing staffing shortages. In late June, a spokesperson for the agency confirmed that at least 30 IDHS employees were in various stages of the disciplinary process for inappropriately taking PPP loans. At the time, eight IDHS employees had been fired, six had resigned and 16 were pending disciplinary action.

In a statement, the agency said that it is "committed to safeguarding the public" and takes the outcomes of the OEIG's investigations seriously.

"Falsifying a federal loan document, for significant and improper personal gain, calls into question one's character, honesty, and ability to act ethically," the statement read.

"While the vast majority of IDHS' roughly 14,000 state employees are hard-working people of strong character who work tirelessly to help the most vulnerable, it is deeply concerning any time an employee takes advantage of public programs."

The agency said it will continue to work to detect and punish fraud committed by its workers, in cooperation with the OEIG, law enforcement and federal authorities.

The fraud was not limited to IDHS. Collectively, state employees may have obtained millions of dollars in fraudulent payments. A spokesperson for Gov. JB Pritzker declined to provide specifics about how many employees have faced disciplinary action for PPP fraud, saying that the governor's office does not comment on ongoing investigations. While some employees have already received notices of their termination, they have a right to appeal that decision.

Not every state employee who claimed a PPP loan committed fraud. Some may have had legitimate outside employment that made them eligible for the federal loan program. Those individuals would not be disciplined.

State policies require employees to disclose secondary income, and certain state employees, such as agency managers and people who are responsible for procurement and other financial dealings, must also file statements of economic interest with the secretary of state's office that would detail outside income. The investigations may center around whether they filed fraudulent paperwork to obtain the loan, thereby acting in a way unbecoming of a state employee, or failed to follow ethical guidelines disclosing such income – or both.

The OEIG is not a criminal law enforcement authority. In general, it investigates state employees for breaches of ethics and other misconduct and

makes recommendations that could range from retraining to termination, depending on the seriousness of the offense. If conduct is criminal in nature, OEIG has the authority to share its findings with law enforcement.

Other public sector employees in Illinois have also come under scrutiny for PPP fraud. Numerous Cook County government workers have been terminated or resigned for bilking the program of hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past year.

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