

Testimony of Mike Newman, Deputy Director, AFSCME Council 31  
FY 17 Cook County Proposed Budget

I am here today to ask this Board to take the necessary steps to prevent the layoffs of hundreds of Cook County employees and the related damage to vital public services. Without new revenue, the projected budget deficit could necessitate 400-500 layoffs and cutbacks in vital services delivered by County government. The Administration has indicated these cuts would have to come primarily in public safety related areas of the budget such as the jail, courts, and probation.

Cook County government is already understaffed on the frontlines in public safety and almost every other department. Layoffs would not only be devastating to the affected employees and their families, but would also damage the critical services that they provide. Every possible measure should be taken to avoid such layoffs. The County needs more revenue, and AFSCME supports revenue-raising measures, including the tax on sweetened beverages that would prevent these layoffs. And as has been discussed for years, the County's fiscal outlook will never be set right until the issues with the property tax levy have been fully addressed.

Even with new revenue, however, the proposed budget includes 220 layoffs that the Cook County Health and Hospitals System has said are necessary as part of its "transformation." At the same time, the System's plan calls for hiring some 400-500 new employees. Why would a health system layoff LPNs when it has consistently been unable to hire enough RNs to fulfill current responsibilities, resulting in massive overtime costs and the use of expensive contract nurses? And why would the System layoff administrative and clerical staff when the System routinely renews outside contracts for far more expensive private contract employees. Instead of laying off hundreds of employees while hiring new employees, the System should be offering new positions and training opportunities to employees facing layoff, and looking for smarter, less painful ways to accomplish a transformation. The need for transformation is not a new or sudden development. After lengthy discussions, AFSCME and other unions entered into an agreement with the System almost 4 years ago to work together to transform the System while avoiding massive layoffs. Unfortunately, despite repeated efforts by the unions, the System chose not to avail itself of that opportunity or to honor that agreement.

We are also asking you to halt the scheme to privatize toxicology services in the Medical Examiner's Office. Commissioners will recall the scandalous media reports about this office in 2012. The ME's Office has greatly improved operations and has just regained its accreditation. Privatization would be a step back onto the slippery slope of defunding followed by the erosion of service quality. We are told privatization will save money, but the ME has refused to provide her cost study. We are told privatization would avoid the need to make significant investments in equipment and staff, but that investment has already been made. We are told privatization would speed up test results, but the toxicology lab has routinely met its timeliness goals even while investing staff time in the Office's accreditation process, training new staff, and bringing new equipment online. AFSCME members employed at the ME's Office have already presented additional, more detailed testimony as to why privatization should be rejected by the Board.

AFSCME supports efforts to improve staffing in the Public Defender's Office. For example, there is currently only one Spanish language interpreter for the entire office. Imagine the delays if an attorney has to wait for the one interpreter in order to speak to her client or if an investigator has to wait to gather information in the community. Caseloads are too high, driving a need to request delays and continuances. The PD often represents clients who can't afford to make bond, so these delays drive up costs in the jail system. And too many clients plead guilty simply to get out of jail.

AFSCME Council 31 stands ready to work with Commissioners to amend this budget to increase revenue, avoid layoffs, and improve public services.