



ON THE

# MOVE

**“There’s no greater honor”**

**AFSCME members in IDVA  
help veterans thrive**

**PAGES 8 & 9**

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BY ROBERTA  
LYNCH

WE MUST  
MAINTAIN  
OUR UNITY  
AND OUR  
DETERMINATION.

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

# Can the labor movement survive the next four years?

**A**fter reading Project 2025—the Heritage Foundation blueprint for a second Trump Administration—I knew that labor unions in our country were in for a hard time. But I didn't really have a clue how hard it would be.

That was back in 2024 when I was assuming a repeat of Donald Trump's first term when the rule of law more or less prevailed. We knew then that we didn't have a president who would come out and walk a picket line with us, who would worry about low wages, or would prioritize worker safety. But we also knew we didn't have a president who was actively out to get us.

All that changed this January with the advent of a new Trump administration, firmly rooted in the Project 2025 game plan. Almost immediately it became clear that the second term would be radically different than the first. With manic intensity and a plethora of pens, the new president set about churning out reams of executive orders aimed at severing the bonds of human solidarity on which our country has relied since its founding.

Instead, we have seen the shameless elevation of the billionaire class with all of its arrogance and greed on full display, beginning with those prime seats at the inauguration ceremony. And we've seen one billionaire in particular launch an all-out offensive on the entire federal government and the workers who keep it running.

Nowhere is solidarity more fundamentally affirmed and diligently practiced than in the American labor movement. In the ranks of our unions, we have learned that it is in coming together and standing together that we are able to improve our working lives and build a better future for ourselves and our families.

And it is precisely because of the potency of

that unity that organized labor has now become a ripe target for the Trump administration.

First, there was the swift and legally questionable removal of members of the National Labor Relations Board who were known to be champions of workers' rights, accompanied by the appointment of virulently anti-labor staff at the board. So, almost overnight, workers in the private sector found they have nowhere to turn when employers trample on their rights.

Next came the senseless decimation of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS), a body specifically charged with helping to resolve conflicts between unions and employers. The FMCS has helped prevent massive work stoppages that could have hampered economic activity all across the country. And it has helped to forestall employer lock-outs and other outright attempts to crush workers who seek a better life. The agency can't be called pro-labor, but it most certainly can be called pro-fairness. Unfortunately, fairness seems to be a value held in near-contempt by this administration.

Then there's the U.S. Department of Labor. For decades, its core mission has included protecting the health and safety of America's workforce. Yet now its mine safety program (MSHA), its workplace hazards research arm (NIOSH), and its nationwide workplace inspection system (OSHA) are all being drastically weakened.


And, of course, most dire of all is the administration's outright obliteration of the union rights of federal

employees, barring any form of collective bargaining and refusing to honor the terms of current union contracts. In other words, with the stroke of one of those pens, hundreds of thousands of federal employees no longer have the right to union representation.

And clearly the administration isn't done yet. In the midst of all these assaults on labor rights, I think often about Project 2025's recommendation that "Congress should also consider whether public-sector unions are appropriate in the first place." In other words, they want to ban the existence of public sector unions anywhere in the country based on the allegation that "they are not compatible with constitutional government."

At the moment our bargaining rights as public sector workers here in Illinois seem secure. We live in a state with elected officials who by and large respect labor rights and that has a strong public employee collective bargaining law.

But our bargaining power is all too likely to be significantly reduced by this administration's all-out assault on the public sector itself. We've already seen large-scale cutbacks to a wide variety of funding that helps sustain the operations of state and local governments. As we go to the bargaining table all across Illinois in the coming year (or two or three!), employers are almost certainly going to plead poverty, pointing to this massive reduction in federal support that had been built into their financial operations for decades.

We don't know what else will be coming at us. But we do know what we can do right now to be ready for whatever comes: Build every local union AFSCME Strong. Maintain our unity and our determination. Don't get discouraged or give up. If we refuse to back down, we can survive whatever this administration throws at us—and come out stronger for it in the end. 



### ON THE MOVE

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# State employee hiring continues to improve

The staffing crisis in state government isn't over, but a new report from the Department of Central Management Services shows that—thanks in large part to the efforts of our union—hiring is picking up.

From fiscal year 2023 to '24, the state workforce grew by 7% overall, reaching a headcount of more than 51,000 employees. That's the highest level since 2008. These recent gains have nearly erased the losses in state headcount which occurred during Bruce Rauner's budget impasse and the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In some areas, such as the Department of Human Services, the state has made major strides in hiring, most notably after AFSCME pressed the department to begin converting contract staffers brought on during the pandemic into full-time state employees. That effort was highly successful, as DHS saw 2,625 new hires in calendar year 2024, the most of any state agency.

Short-staffing is still a serious problem in the Department of Corrections, which saw the second-most new hires with 1,026. Recent initiatives pushed by AFSCME—such as the establishment of regional DOC cadet

training centers—should push that number even higher in the coming year.

Other departments are seeing increases in new hires too, such as Children and Family Services (+625), Veterans Affairs (+185), Public Health (+148), Juvenile Justice (+108) and Innovation and Technology (+204).

The report is the result of AFSCME-backed legislation that requires the state to be more transparent about its recruitment, hiring and retention efforts. The staffing crisis began during the Rauner administration but accelerated during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. And Illinois is not alone; from state to local governments, public employers throughout the nation have had difficulty hiring.

As soon as it became clear how critically understaffed many workplaces were becoming, Council 31 got to work, pushing the state to reduce barriers to hiring and make the



application process faster and easier.

Pursuant to the AFSCME-State of Illinois Master Contract, a joint labor-management Recruitment, Hiring and Retention Task Force was established in 2023, where union members and state management worked together to identify barriers to hiring and recommend improvements.

Jeremy Givens, a correctional lieutenant at Lawrence

Correctional Center who serves on the task force, said that the collaborative effort moved slowly.

"It felt like it took forever to get to a position where we were seeing change," Givens said.

He noted that union representatives on the task force pushed the state to market these jobs to younger generations as "forever jobs" with good benefits, good wages, and strong workplace rights.

"It's important that the state get into high schools and college job fairs to let the younger generation know that these are good jobs that you can have for a long time," he said.

But even with all of this progress, it's still too early to claim victory: Understaffing remains a serious problem throughout state government.

"There's still a lot more work to do," Givens said.

## FIRST CLASS OF IDOC CADETS GRADUATES FROM SOUTHERN REGION TRAINING ACADEMY



The Southern Region Training Academy is the result of the diligent work of the AFSCME members on the IDOC Standing Committee. The committee argued that establishing training centers closer to where recruits live and work would result in more applications—and the full graduating class in Carterville is proof that the idea works.



# We Care, We Count!

Direct care employees ramp up fight for fair wages

Direct support professionals (DSPs) are lifting up their voices and taking their fight for fair wages to the state Capitol this spring.

AFSCME is backing House Bill 3089 and Senate Bill 1617. Both bills would raise DSP wages by \$2 an hour and require employers to pass on 100% of the wage increase to direct care employees.

AFSCME DSPs have led the fight for higher pay in community disability agencies with great results, successfully raising wages by 78% since 2017.

But wages are still less than 150% of the statewide minimum wage, the level that independent research group Guidehouse has recommended. If AFSCME's bills pass, DSP wages will be in compliance with that recommendation.

But there are some political forces lobbying for less, making

the activism of every DSP crucial in this fight.

Hundreds of DSPs have already signed a petition urging the legislature to pass these increases.

In their local unions, DSPs have been making calls to their state lawmakers and urging them to support the bills. Those calls are making a difference—and laid the groundwork for Christine Rivera, a member of AFSCME Local 3492 at the Ray Graham Association, to testify before a House committee on March 27.

"The work is very challenging. We work hard to make sure our individuals are well-cared-for and have all of their needs met," Rivera said at the hearing.



Members of AFSCME Local 2515 call their lawmakers to demand fair wages.

## Local 3506 wins \$480,000 sick time agreement

It took a lot of determination, but members of AFSCME Local 3506 who work for the City Colleges of Chicago held firm and secured an agreement that righted a wrong and won some \$480,000.

The 350 Local 3506 members work as adult educators, English as a second language teachers, and more.

In 2024, with strong backing from AFSCME Council 31, the Chicago City Council passed an ordinance guaranteeing all those who work within the city limits up to five days of paid sick time each year.

But City Colleges management was refusing to enact the policy for its own employees.

Citing their irregular teaching schedules, management has long refused to give adult educators any meaningful sick time.

Local 3506 raised the issue in the most recent round of contract negotiations, but management's team dismissed their arguments. So they brought the issue to members of the City Council, alerting

them to the fact that one of the city's own sister agencies was refusing to implement the ordinance the body had passed.

The pressure campaign worked. Local 3506 was soon able to reach an agreement with management that secures their lawful paid leave going forward and also makes them whole for the leave that management has denied them in the form of a lump-sum payment.

In total, their agreement won back some \$480,000 for the local's members, which amounted to checks of between \$2,000 to \$5,000 per employee.

"This was a half-million dollars that was taken from our members, and we got it back," said George Roumbanis, president of Local 3506.

"But this job is challenging in another way," she continued. "The chronically low wages mean that many of us struggle to make ends meet. I know I speak for many of my co-workers when I say that I don't

want to leave my individuals and leave this profession, but the financial realities of being a DSP make it difficult not to consider."

DSP Lobby Day is Wednesday, April 30, at the state

Capitol in Springfield, and all DSPs are encouraged to attend. Check with your local union to see what plans are in the works, or register at [AFSCME31.org/DSPLobbyDay](https://AFSCME31.org/DSPLobbyDay).

## Union wins job back for wrongfully terminated youth care worker

Antoinette Pleasant is a member of AFSCME Local 55, which represents workers at non-profit child care agency Maryville Academy. Pleasant works at a residential home for pregnant adolescent girls and their babies, offering support services to help teach youth in her care the skills they need as new mothers.

Pleasant loves her job and takes Maryville's mission seriously. But that didn't stop management from firing her in September 2023 after they leveled several unfounded allegations against her: She was tardy once, she stayed late twice without approval from a supervisor, she used her personal cell phone at work, and she had a fraught working relationship with one of the

troubled youths in her care. Management had violated her rights under her union contract, and her union filed a grievance on her behalf. An arbitrator ultimately agreed with the union.

The arbitrator particularly noted Pleasant's decade of "meets or exceeds expectations" performance ratings and clean disciplinary record. The arbitrator criticized management for



bringing forth unsubstantiated claims and emphasized that as a long-term employee, Pleasant deserved greater consideration.

"They tried to make me out to be this monster that I'm not," Pleasant said. "I'm very proud of the work that our union has done. And I'm glad to be back at work because I love what I do and love being a part of the union."



# All-out assault on workers' rights straight from the White House

**R**ipped straight from the Project 2025 playbook, the Trump administration is making anti-worker, anti-union policy into a central pillar of its efforts to reshape the country.

These efforts began almost immediately after Trump was sworn into office, as Elon Musk and his DOGE cronies forced their way into numerous agencies and departments in the federal government, laying off tens of thousands of employees, firing probationary workers, and illegally shutting down agencies.

In March, the administration expanded its attack on workers, issuing executive orders that ended the collective bargaining rights of nearly 1 million employees at more than 20 agencies and departments,

including the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the departments of Agriculture, Veterans Affairs, Health and Human Services, State, Justice, Energy, Interior, Treasury, Defense and others.

AFSCME has joined other unions in federal lawsuits challenging these actions.

"Federal workers—including thousands of AFSCME members—are the lifeblood of their communities," said AFSCME President Lee Saunders. "They protect our clean drinking water and food supply, care for veterans, support

American farmers, administer Medicaid and Social Security and so much more. This attack is meant to silence their voices, so Elon Musk and his minions can shred the services that working people depend on the federal government to do."


Less direct but perhaps no less dangerous has been the weakening of labor rights in the private sector, too. Other Trump actions rescinded the Biden executive order that increased the minimum wage for federal contractors, shut down the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (an independent agency that acts as a mediator in large-scale labor disputes), and tried to paralyze the National Labor Relations Board, which is intended to ensure that employers comply with relevant labor law.

"While the attack now is directly on the union rights of



AFSCME members rally in Washington, D.C. to protect public services.

federal government employees, we know that the rights of all other public employees will soon be in dire jeopardy as well," said AFSCME Council 31 Deputy Director Mike Newman. "AFSCME members in Illinois can't lay down while the White

House targets federal union members. So far this administration seems to be following the Project 2025 playbook word for word—and page 82 says that the administration should work with Congress to outlaw all public sector unions." 

## Musk wreaks havoc across the US, slashing federal jobs, programs and funding

**B**y effectively allowing billionaire Elon Musk to take a chainsaw to the ranks of federal employees, programs—including Social Security—and funding essential to the operations of state and local governments, President Donald Trump has made clear his intent to take down the federal government as we know it.

The assault has hit critical funding in nearly every sector, from support for scientific research, to the protection and operation of national parks, to museums and libraries, and to programs such as Head Start that fund early childhood education.

One of the first actions taken by the administration was its illegal attempt on Jan. 27 to fully halt the disbursement of all federal grants and loans, including funds already allocated and approved by Congress. This action halted hundreds of billions in funding to state and local government for disaster relief aid, Medicaid, education and transportation funding, and other programs. Attorneys

general from 22 states quickly sued over this directive, and the White House postponed it a day later.

But the underlying order—which required all entities receiving federal funds to purge themselves of any and all efforts to foster equity in hiring or the provision of services—remains in effect. And while the administration couldn't stop this funding in one fell swoop, it has continued attacking vital state and local government grants and programs in a piecemeal process, all while massively cutting the federal workforce that oversees them.

At the same time, Elon Musk's DOGE team has



Federal employees in Chicago rally against mass firings.


wantonly shuttered dozens of federal offices and programs, wiping out the jobs of tens of thousands of employees in the process—all in the service of tax cuts for billionaires.

Even the U.S. Postal Service, a symbol of national unity, is in the line of fire. Musk has already laid out his plan to privatize its package delivery functions (which generate the income that keeps the service

operating), leaving it only with the responsibility for mail delivery to every corner of the country—a service that cannot possibly raise the revenues needed.

As part of massive cuts at the Department of Health and Human Services, the administration proposed slashing \$750 million for the early childhood program Head Start, and closed five regional offices for the program, including one in Chicago.

According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 28,000 children in 102 Illinois counties learn at a pre-school funded by about \$478 million in Head Start grants.

AFSCME has been an active force in many of the lawsuits taking on the Trump administration's reckless and often-illegal cuts to vital federal funding, with members joining protests and other actions in Illinois and around the country. 



# Chicago History Museum workers notch historic union win

It's a win for the history books: Workers at the Chicago History Museum have overwhelmingly voted to form their union, Chicago History Museum Workers United, with AFSCME Council 31.

In a union election held April 1, almost 90% of votes were yes for the union, which now represents some 70 employees, including curators, librarians, designers, visitor services associates, maintenance technicians and others.

**"We have power now."**

Ash McCullough, who works in visitor services, said they wanted to help form a union to address unsafe working conditions and unfair, inconsistent treatment by management.

When the final vote totals came in, they said the feeling was unlike any other.

"I was ecstatic," McCullough said. "I knew we were going to win, but I was thrilled we won by so much. To see the percentage we won by was so validating—we were all on the same page, and we all feel like we deserve better."

CHM employees

announced their union campaign in a public letter on Feb. 12. The letter said that together in their union, employees will seek better communication with management, improved job security, livable wages, a voice on the job and other priorities.

"The history of Chicago is deeply rooted in the labor movement, and we are honored to not only preserve and share, but to make our own place in that history alongside our colleagues at cultural institutions across Chicago," the workers wrote.

Drew Roberson, an archivist at the museum, said they were inspired to organize their union to strengthen their collective voice and demand respect from management. Roberson's grandfather instilled strong union values in them, showing them that workers have power in a union if they stand up and take it.

"With the union and the support that we have, we have power now," Roberson said.

The day after the election, in an outrageous



Chicago History Museum employees won their union election by an overwhelming margin.

attempt at anti-union retribution, management fired four employees and disciplined three others who were active in organizing. Council 31 promptly filed unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board and workers quickly organized a picket to defend their colleagues.

At the picket, supporters tried to enter the museum to visit its labor history exhibit, which shows the struggles workers faced throughout history in their attempts to form unions. Management turned every supporter away at the door and ordered workers not to distribute free tickets to any of them.

Together as a union, CHM employees will take the next steps to shape their future at the museum. In the coming weeks, they'll gather in listening sessions, nominate and elect a bargaining committee, and circulate bargaining surveys to let the voice of every colleague be heard and help shape the union's bargaining priorities.

# Mississippi Valley Library District workers form union with AFSCME

In the Mississippi Valley Library District, workers at the Fairmont City and Collinsville libraries have a simple mission: to keep libraries safe, open, and welcoming to all members of the community, no matter who they are.

Unfortunately, like many libraries across the country, those in the district have found themselves under assault by right-wing efforts to limit what books are available and what programming is allowed.

This assault began a few years ago, when

reactionary library board members were elected. They immediately began attempting to force their extreme political agenda on the library and the community.

The board banned pride displays, removed books from library shelves, and inserted itself into the

process of selecting books for circulation. Then they

**"...I don't want anyone to feel like anyone has anything to lose with their job. I want people to come to work and feel safe to be there."**

threatened the jobs and benefits of the workers who do

everything they can to make the library a safe space for everyone, with the board president questioning at a public meeting why 100% of medical care is covered for staff.

In response, library workers decided to fight back by organizing a union with AFSCME. While workers love their job, the treatment by library board members brought them together to make sure their jobs are secured by a contract that can't be infringed upon by political actors.

"We're really lucky where we're at. We get good benefits," says Amy Noakes, a leader of the union and a

circulation supervisor at Collinsville library. "But I don't want anyone to feel like anyone has anything to lose with their job. I want people to come to work and feel safe to be there."

Mississippi Valley Library District workers are also looking to make sure that the library stays safe and open for everyone.

"I just want people to come in and see items that represent them and be able to come and tell us anything," Noakes said. "And I wish people weren't out there trying to make it so hard. We are a public library. We should be available to everyone."



# Fix Tier 2 fight continues

**C**haos and uncertainty resulting from the Trump administration’s cuts to state and local government funding have thrown an unexpected wrench in the We Are One Illinois coalition’s efforts to fix Tier 2 pension benefits.

Congressional Republicans have adopted a budget framework that will cut Medicaid by \$880 billion over the next 10 years, which will include billions in cuts to the state of Illinois’ Medicaid reimbursements. These cuts will put a serious strain on the state’s budget. Numerous other federal programs that provide funding to the state are also in danger.

Despite these potential cuts, AFSCME and the coalition are doing everything possible to keep the drive for Tier 2 improvements moving forward in the General Assembly.

The biggest stumbling block thus far is the significant cost of such improvements.

Even before the federal cuts, identifying revenue was a key barrier to fixing Tier 2. The We Are One Illinois coalition has committed to working to identify new revenue sources to fund the improvements.

Public employees have made their voices heard loud and clear in Springfield that the unfair Tier 2 pension needs to be improved. Union members packed eight regional town halls in the fall, where they told legislators how Tier 2 pensions make it difficult to plan for and afford retirement, and how the prospects of a lesser pension benefit are hampering hiring at schools and public agencies.




November’s Fix Tier 2 rally sent a strong message to Springfield.

In November, thousands of public employees, from AFSCME members to teachers to firefighters, all joined a massive rally at the state Capitol. Longtime observers said it was one of the largest rallies ever held inside the Capitol, and lawmakers in the building could not ignore union members’

calls of “Fix Tier 2” as they echoed through the rotunda.

“We need to make sure that all employees are safe and secure in their retirement, and we have an equitable age we can all retire at,” said AFSCME Local 1019 member Melissa Porter at the rally. “That’s what we’re fighting for.”

Together, these actions have built a strong foundation and have put the Tier 2 issue squarely on lawmakers’ radar screens. To get Tier 2 improvements over the finish line, however, more action will be needed. Stay tuned for ways you can step up in this fight. 

# Local elections net gains for workers

**L**ocal elections don’t always grab the headlines, but for AFSCME members who work in local government, they can make a big difference.

In the election held April 1, 70% of AFSCME-recommended candidates won their races, from mayors to school board candidates.

After years of vilifying village employees represented by AFSCME Local 368, Orland Park Mayor Keith Pekau went down to defeat. AFSCME supported his opponent, Jim Dodge, who sent Pekau packing with 57% of the vote. Dodge pledges to restore trust between the village and its employees, and to create constructive dialogue with union members.

In Joliet, members of AFSCME Local 440 have been fighting back against the mayor’s efforts to strip their rights in contract negotiations. The local mobilized an army of volunteers to knock doors in support of three city council candidates who would rebalance the city’s political makeup and

give working people a stronger voice.

“We told our members, we’re in a dogfight for a contract right now,” said Local 440

President Jim Anderson. “If the current mayor is able to pick up another friendly seat on the council, we’re going to be in worse shape.”

The union’s efforts paid off in Joliet: All three candidates won their races, due in part to the hundreds of doors knocked by AFSCME.

“With the results of this election, we were able to put [the mayor] in a position where he’s


going to have to make a decision whether he’s going to vote with or against the unions on every tight vote,” Anderson said.

Elsewhere in the state, AFSCME members who work for public libraries mobilized to support library board candidates who value their work and the services they provide.

In St. Charles, AFSCME supported two candidates for library board; due to the efforts of Local

726 members, both won.

In Rockford, members supported the incumbent mayor, an alderman, and two school board candidates. All four won.

“Local elections matter,” said Council 31 Director of Political and Legislative Affairs Joanna Webb-Gauvin. “The outcomes of these races can make a big difference to the AFSCME members who work in those areas.” 



Members of AFSCME Local 440 hit the streets to support AFSCME’s recommended candidates in Joliet.

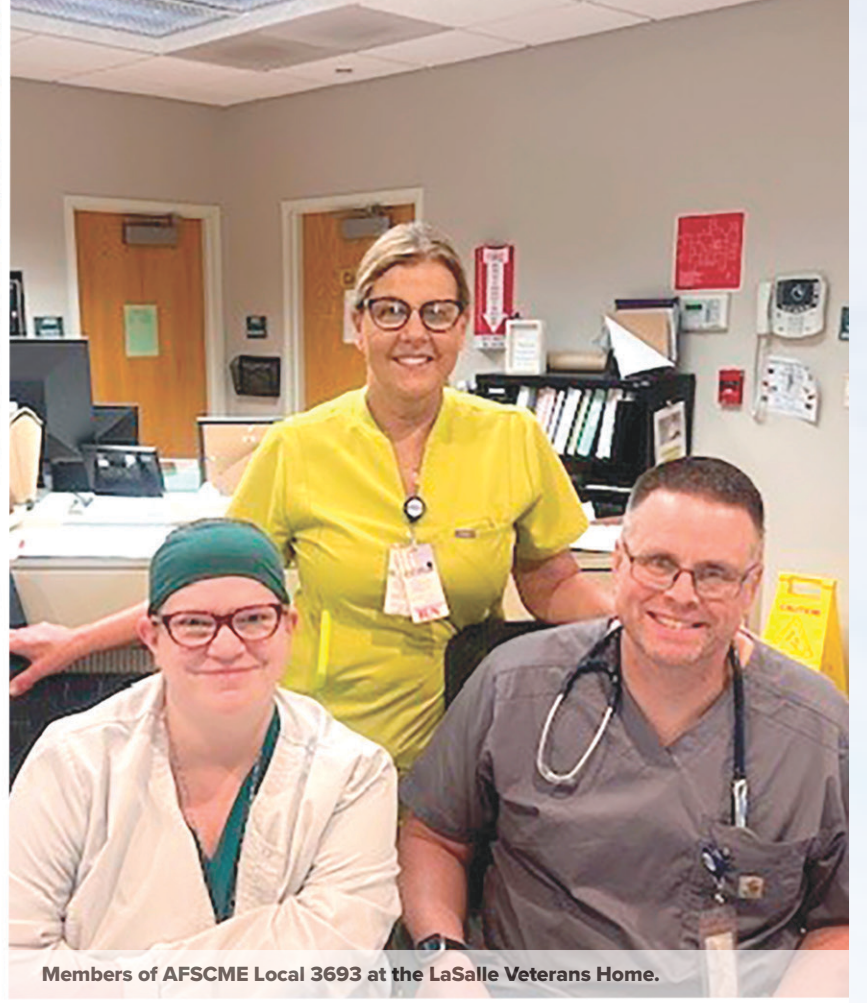


# Veterans give everything to our country

## AFSCME members in IDVA give back



Veterans Services Officers (VSOs) meet veterans where they are.




Members of AFSCME Local 3693 at the LaSalle Veterans Home.



Teams of VSOs are embedded in communities throughout the state to connect servicemembers with vital resources.





Every day across Illinois, thousands of AFSCME members who work for the state Department of Veterans Affairs dedicate themselves to serving those who served our nation. From nursing homes that care for aging veterans to service officers who help veterans navigate complex benefits systems, these employees embody a special commitment to America's heroes. Now those services are threatened.

### **Caring for the “living history books” at Illinois’ veterans homes**

“Everyone in long-term care deserves the best care,” says Jennifer Hudelson, a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at Quincy Veterans Home and president of AFSCME Local 1753. “But veterans hold a special place in my heart.”

For 11 years, Hudelson has witnessed generations of service members pass through the home's doors. After working in a private sector nursing facility for \$9.25 an hour while paying for her own insurance, she found that the veterans home offered better wages and benefits—but she quickly discovered something even more meaningful.

“It's the history of it all,” Hudelson said. “Nowhere else in the world can you get living, walking history books. The stories, the lives they've led—they're amazing. I love loving on them. They're like extra grandparents.”

Her workday starts with morning greetings and hugs, especially important in the special memory unit where she works. “The first thing we do when we get in is say good morning to everyone. We go and hug them. We make sure they know that we have their backs.”

The emotional connections run deep. Hudelson recalls a World War II veteran who, at 15 years old, lied about his age to fight in Europe. He became a medic and was among the first Americans to discover the Dachau concentration camp. The horror of what he witnessed there and throughout the war caught up with him when he returned home, and his life would never be the same.

“He was stubborn and mad,” Hudelson remembers. “I would tell him, ‘I'm mad with you.’ Pretty soon, that's how I got that information, that relationship we established. After all those years, he got it off his chest.”

Now, Hudelson and her colleagues primarily care for Vietnam-era veterans, who present different challenges.

“They came back and were not greeted with greatness,” Hudelson said. “They're tougher. They're less talkative.”

At any veterans home, the nurses and doctors are on the front lines of care, but just like in the military, a whole army of workers is needed. Dietary employees keep everyone well-fed. Maintenance workers make sure that the grounds and facilities are in tip-top shape.

“For all of us, our Number One priority is our veterans,” Hudelson said. “There is no greater honor than to do what we do.”

### **Veterans Services Officers: The lifelines in the community**

Veterans Services Officers (VSOs) like Matthew Taylor work less visibly in communities throughout the state, giving one-on-one support to veterans to help them access care and benefits.

“We're not known by our title,” Taylor said. “We're known as the person who helped with a VA pension claim, or helped someone figure out how to afford their retirement home. Our reputation in the community is more important than our title.”

A veteran himself, as all VSOs are required to be, Taylor joined IDVA in 2012. VSOs like him are spread across the state, meeting veterans where they are, from VA clinics to senior facilities.

“On a typical day, a VSO with our organization is meeting with someone to help build the evidence needed to submit a state or federal program application,” he said.

“The paperwork is just the end product of hours spent discussing needs, gathering documentation, and navigating complex eligibility requirements.”

VSOs help veterans access health care enrollment, education benefits, pension programs, and assistance for surviving spouses and children. One of the most impactful services they provide is helping seniors qualify for VA pensions that can be the difference between difficult senior years and a restful retirement.

“When I can see on a veteran or surviving spouse's face that we made a difference and they don't need to be so stressed about their finances, that makes a difference for us,” Taylor said. “When you get to that stage in your life, those should be years when you're not fretting about finances.”

While being a veteran himself helps Taylor relate to those he serves, he said that the most important qualification is his thorough knowledge of the sprawling agency and its programs, especially when bad actors and misleading TV ads muddy the water about what benefits veterans are entitled to.

“With so much misinformation out there, it's refreshing to most people when they're talking to someone who knows what they're talking about,” he said.

### **In D.C., veterans services are being dismantled**


IDVA employees' special mission is being undermined by an administration in Washington, DC, that is drastically slashing federal programs and services for veterans. The mass firings at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs driven by billionaire Elon Musk have put thousands of veterans out of work, and even more drastic firings are reportedly planned, which will put up barriers to care and benefits veterans are entitled to.

Nearly 500,000 people work for the federal VA, and more than 25% of them are veterans.

In early April, an internal memo from the federal VA told managers to prepare for cuts of more than 80,000 jobs.

The Trump administration is also considering privatization of certain VA functions. By diverting billions toward private sector care, resources for VA facilities will dwindle, leading to staffing shortages which will stretch the remaining employees to their limits.

Proposed changes to eligibility requirements for pension programs would make it harder for aging veterans to qualify for benefits that Taylor and other VSOs would help them secure.

Despite these threats, AFSCME members in Illinois remain steadfast in their commitment to serve veterans now and in the future. 



# Medicaid cuts could hit us all

Deep cuts to Medicaid being pushed by President Donald Trump’s administration and Republicans in Congress could do real damage to public services and to the jobs of AFSCME members in Illinois.

Federal Medicaid dollars help to fund hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, state veterans’ homes, substance use disorder treatment centers, and other health care providers.

Medicaid also provides health insurance coverage for more than 3.4 million Illinoisans, of which 44% are children, 9% are seniors, and 7% are adults with disabilities.

Medicaid dollars are the largest source of federal funding for state budgets. If these dollars dry up, states will have little choice but to slash budgets and jobs for a broad range of other vital services.

Illinois received more than \$20 billion from the federal government for Medicaid spending in fiscal year 2024 alone. Medicaid cuts could directly hit state developmental centers, funding for behavioral health services, and community-based agencies that care for people with disabilities.

“We care for developmentally disabled people, and federal Medicaid dollars keep us open, fund our jobs, and keep our individuals safe,” said Jarred Harshman, a mental health technician II and president of AFSCME Local 172 at Mabley Developmental Center in Dixon. “Cutting Medicaid is a real scary thing for us, our future and the individuals that we care for.”

To prevent such dire consequences, legislators could cut other state agencies and functions, such as child protective services, environmental protection or corrections.

Federal funding for other vital programs and services of state government are also being slashed by the Trump administration, including public health and veterans’ assistance.

Local governments would feel the pain, too. In Cook County, Medicaid pays most of the cost of the CountyCare program that allows the county



Medicaid saves lives and funds jobs in Illinois—but Congress wants to gut it to pay for tax breaks for the wealthy.

Hospital & Health System to serve half a million low-income uninsured people.

“People are afraid of not having health care coverage. If funding for our programs stops, where would our patients go for primary care, specialists like orthopedists and gynecologists, ultrasounds, x-rays? We’re the only hospital that offers charitable care like this,” said Kimberly Martin, president of AFSCME

Local 1178 at Cook County Hospital and a caseworker/patient financial counselor. “Plus, if that money is not coming in, we’d be looking at possible layoffs.”

Republicans want to cut Medicaid and use the money to pay for massive tax breaks for billionaires like Musk. Martin thinks that’s unfair. “The ones with the most money need to be the ones taking the cuts,” she said. “The cuts they’re making only affect

working-class people. How will we provide for our families?”

AFSCME members are fighting back. On Wednesday, March 19, union members and retirees participated in a nationwide Medicaid Day of Action, blitzing Members of Congress with tens of thousands of emails and phone calls all sending the same message: “No cuts to Medicaid to pay for billionaire tax breaks!”

## UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS EMPLOYEES STAND TOGETHER—AND REACH A TENTATIVE AGREEMENT!



Members of AFSCME Locals 698 and 3700 at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign were fighting hard for fair wages. The two locals stood united in their efforts to win a fair contract, and this rally on March 26 sent a strong message to university administration that they were ready to do whatever it took. That message was received, and on April 14, the two locals reached a tentative agreement. More information in our next issue.





# Federal union members speak out against assault on services and union rights

Federal employees work in cities, large and small, in the most rural areas and the most urban. Their work is often unseen or taken for granted, but it's vitally important to the functioning of our towns, cities and state.

Members of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the largest union representing federal employees, are fighting for their jobs, the public services they provide and for the union rights that are under attack.

Three federal local union leaders who work and live in Illinois shared their experiences with *On the Move*. They encourage AFSCME members to speak out against this assault on public services and union rights.

**Brent Barron**  
AFGE Local 648  
Department of Labor



Brent Barron's members are crucial to protecting workers' rights across the Midwest. They investigate wage and hour violations, inspect worksites for safety hazards, and evaluate pension plans to ensure they're

being managed well. But employees across the department are being fired en masse and have had their own unions targeted.

"They've effectively wiped out collective bargaining agreements, cancelled dues deductions, and eliminated official time for many federal workers," Barron said. Now those employees are on their own—they'll need to seek private counsel for workplace issues—and what public employee has the means to hire their own lawyer to resolve disputes?"

Barron urged his fellow union members to recognize how cuts to federal employees and programs puts us all at risk.

"Is taking meat inspectors away making us safer?" Barron asked. "Is firing people who do water inspections for the EPA making us safer? Is destroying the TSA union making us safer? No—it's putting us all at risk."

**Veronica Bobbitt**  
AFGE Local 911  
Department of Housing & Urban Development



Bobbitt works for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, helping property owners manage their low-income rentals, making sure that tenants' rights are respected, and that the properties are in good, livable conditions. After 26

years in federal service, she has seen her HUD local's membership drop by 27% in just a few months due to drastic job cuts.

Bobbitt emphasizes that the administration's actions threaten more than just federal jobs—they threaten the work that AFSCME members in Illinois do.

"This isn't just going to affect federal workers. It will trickle down to every part of America," Bobbitt said. "The funding HUD provides funnels to states and cities like Peoria for infrastructure and community development."

She said that union members can't give up in the face of these attacks—they need to fight back.

"We must continue fighting for these programs and funding at the state level," Bobbitt said. "We must reach across neighboring states and let people know what's at stake if we're not there to do this work. These programs are critical for the American people."

**Nicole Cantello**  
AFGE Local 704  
Environmental Protection Agency



As president of an Environmental Protection Agency local, Nicole has watched in horror as the Trump administration's attacks on her agency have intensified.

"The scale and scope is unprecedented," she says. "First,

employees were put on administrative leave pending layoffs. Then they threatened to fire 1,000 scientists—the very people who determine how we monitor environmental hazards."

Nicole points to the East Palestine, Ohio, train derailment response as an example of EPA's crucial role in protecting Americans from environmental hazards: "Our region responded with boots on the ground, with scientists to tell us how to measure pollutants and determine safety levels."

Most recently, the administration eliminated the union's right to file grievances, use official time to represent employees and maintain an office.

"They're taking away our ability to represent employees in Region 5," Cantello said. "When you attack EPA workers, you're attacking everybody's health and the environment."

The silver lining, Cantello said, is that federal union members are more fired up to fight for their rights than anytime she can remember.

"Despite the challenges, more people are joining the union—that's been one bright side," she said. "People are energized and willing to get involved."



## FIELD MUSEUM PICKET LEADS TO FAIR FIRST CONTRACT



Hundreds of workers at Chicago's Field Museum and their supporters picketed for a fair contract in front of the museum on March 12. Management saw the support they had and heard their chants, and just weeks later, the union reached an agreement on a strong first contract.



# ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

## Local 1748 unites for a fair contract—and wins!

WHEN AFSCME MEMBERS who work for the McHenry County Probation Department stood together to demand fair pay, they put management on notice that they were united in fighting for what they deserved—and the final contract the local ratified is proof that their unity paid dividends.

The probation department has experienced high turnover in recent years. This was the local's chance to show newer employees the power of the union. They held meetings outside of work to bring members together and keep them up to date on their progress at the bargaining table.

And the members had their committee's back every step of the way. Each day the AFSCME Local 1748 bargaining committee went into negotiations, every member of the local proudly wore stickers declaring their



Members of AFSCME Local 1748 who work for McHenry County showed their support for their bargaining committee every step of the way.

support for their elected negotiating team.

Members reached a turning point in their contract negotiations when they went straight to the top to demand fair wages:

Dozens of employees signed a letter to the chief judge, who oversees the probation department.

"In recent years, we have been frustrated as many talented and experienced

employees have left our department for other jobs," the employees wrote. "We believe that by raising wages, we will be able to maintain a motivated and committed team."

The letter made an impact. They could feel they were getting closer to reaching an agreement. As the expiration of their contract drew closer, workers plastered signs stating the number of days left at their desks for management to see.

5...4...3...2...1...

And on that last day, after putting pressure on management to reach an agreement, the bargaining committee had it. They achieved the fair wages they were demanding. In the first year of the contract, members of Local 1748 will see their pay rise by 10%, and increase by an average of 18% over the three-year contract's term.

The local won a number of other improvements. Employees eligible for on-call pay now receive a flat rate of \$150, as opposed to 2.5 hours of pay. Bilingual employees who use their second language for work duties will now receive an additional \$1,200 per year.

"We did a really good job," said probation officer Riley Mundt. "This is a great starting point to help us work on different things."

The bargaining committee included Mundt, Karen Salas, Thomas Herff and Rachael Bates. The committee was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Crystal Alonzo.



The AFSCME Local 978 bargaining committee changed the hearts and minds of county leaders with passionate letters describing the hardships their low wages caused.





Members of Local 799 stood together and won one of the best contracts they can remember.

## Letters make the difference for Local 978

ON THE MOVE'S JUNE-JULY 2024 issue included letters that members of AFSCME Local 978 who work for LaSalle County wrote to the county Board of Commissioners as they embarked on negotiations for a new contract.

The letters were painful, with powerful descriptions of the hardships members face due to their low wages. They told of how hard it is to keep the lights on, and how every nice thing they do for their kids comes at the expense of a bill that goes unpaid. The unfairness of their low pay was compounded by the fact that the upper echelons of management had given themselves raises of as much as \$10,000.

"It comes down to a disconnect between the lived experience and material conditions of the people making these wages versus the people setting them," said Devon Johnson, who served on the health department bargaining team. "Even then, there were some comments made [by management] that all the clerical staff do is answer the phone and they don't need to be paid that much. But they do important work, just like all of us. We all know we couldn't do our jobs without them doing theirs."

At the time, Local 978 members who work for the health department weren't yet bargaining their own

contract, but they wrote letters in solidarity with their coworkers who were.

When it came time for employees of the health department to begin negotiating their own contract, the stage had already been set. With the letters fresh in management's mind, they were able to breeze through bargaining and make substantial progress both on wages and on work-life balance.

The final agreement, which was ratified unanimously by the members, raises wages by an average of 25%, with the lowest paid positions seeing the largest increases. Program assistants, for example, will see their wages go up by 39% by the end of the contract in 2027.

The local also won improved clock-in language and mileage reimbursement rates for employees who work in the field, and established their first-ever maternity leave policy.

The bargaining committee included Sommer Churchill, Maria Ferrari, Tiffany Gonzalez, Devon Johnson and Shannon Mertes. The committee was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Randy Dominic.

## Local 878 wins strong contract at Southern Illinois University

WHEN THE NEGOTIATING team polled Local 878 members at Southern Illinois

University in Carbondale about what they should focus on in bargaining, the answer was resounding: raising wages.

While many in the local's two units—those performing culinary work in residence halls and those who repair university vehicles—enjoy their jobs, wages had long failed to properly reward their hard work.

"I love my job. I like working at SIU. It's a great place to work, and I think everyone who comes to work here would enjoy their work too," said Local 878 President Nichole Fallatah. "But we were barely getting by. Some of us were working at a university and eligible for food stamps. It shouldn't be like that."

In February, that changed when the local won a strong new contract with improved starting wages for new employees as well as an additional wage increase for longstanding employees tied to their years of service. Local 878 also won improved early recall language, as well as an increase in clothing allowance.

When the local brought their united demand for higher wages to the bargaining table, management relented.

"Management heard what we were saying about wages, and we were able to reach a fair agreement," Fallatah says.

The contract was negotiated by the bargaining committee of Fallatah and Jeff Erwin. The committee was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Jeremy Noelle.

## Local 799 unites for fairness

Members of AFSCME Local 799 who work for Madison County united and built their union stronger.

Three separate bargaining units under Local 799—general, circuit clerk and judicial—bargained contracts which together cover some 340 people who work for Madison County, including those who work for the county's water department, clerk's office, courthouse and more.

In past years, negotiations left the bargaining committee feeling like management didn't respect their work. This time, they vowed to change that by showing the county that they were standing together and would accept nothing less than fair terms.

Local 799's contract campaign kicked off with a lunchtime cookout in September. The visual of union members coming together in solidarity on their lunch hour would stick with management.

Members wore green every Wednesday and every day that the union bargained, showing a united front to management every time they stepped up to the bargaining table.

The final contracts won by Local 799 rewarded their collective struggle.

Management had previously instituted a tiered system for sick time and personal days, which meant that newer employees got only half of the sick time and none of the personal

days that more senior employees received.

In the general unit, the union won the right for probationary employees to take vacation and sick days after the completion of their probationary period. They used to have to wait a full year.

Between the three units, wage increases average 13% over the life of the four-year contract.

They also succeeded in lowering the contributions for employees' share of dependent healthcare coverage and added the ability to exchange sick time for personal days.

"It makes me proud to see everything we accomplished," said Local 799

**"[We] won the best contract we've seen in over 20 years."**

President Molly Schroader. "We brought our union together and won the best contract we've seen in over 20 years."

The Local 799 bargaining committee included Schroader, Joelle Randolph, Lisa Bush, Kristi Hinson, Missy Epps, Amy Loepker, Dave Ezell, Abby Langley and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Shelia Sexton.





# SHORT REPORTS

## Musk wants to compel seniors to come to X for Social Security information

UNDER THE DIRECTION OF DOGE, the Social Security Administration (SSA) is moving all of its public communications off its website and onto the social media site owned by billionaire and DOGE leader Elon Musk, according to reporting from *Wired*.

SSA has used press releases and news articles on its own website to get updates out to the public. Pushing all public communications to X—where only 7% of users are age 65 or older—will make it difficult for seniors to find truthful, reliable information about Social Security.

“Retirees, disabled individuals and the millions of beneficiaries who rely on Social Security should not need an X account to receive updates on the program,” said AFSCME President Lee Saunders. “Moving all Social Security communications to Elon Musk’s personal social media platform is a blatant effort to gain more users and pad X’s profits. This move should ring alarm bells everywhere.”

The Trump administration and Elon Musk have been working to sow distrust in the system that keeps millions of seniors from falling into poverty. Thousands of SSA employees have been fired and dozens of regional offices have been shuttered, making it harder for seniors to get questions answered about their benefits. The move to X will only make things more difficult.

Their endgame in trying to destroy trust in Social Security is simple: They want to reduce benefits and privatize the system so that billionaires can continue to get even richer, while retirees will struggle to get by.

“This administration has made their desire to gut and then privatize Social Security clear,” Saunders said. “Shuttering the program’s regional offices and moving all communications to a single, unaccountable, insecure, for-profit social



Former AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer Bill Lucy was a giant of the labor and civil rights movement. Lucy died in September.

media company is just the next step in their scheme to enrich billionaires with our tax dollars.”

## Paying tribute to Bill Lucy

IN 1968, SANITATION workers took to the streets of Memphis, Tennessee, bearing signs declaring “I AM A MAN,” a slogan that Bill Lucy helped create as he played a pivotal role in the historic strike.

A few years later, Lucy began serving as AFSCME’s secretary-treasurer — a position he would hold for 40 years — and founded the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. He was a powerful voice in the fight against South African apartheid, bringing Nelson Mandela to the United States soon after he was released from prison.

On March 24, leaders of the labor and civil rights movements gathered in Washington, D.C., to pay homage to Lucy, who died last September, and to celebrate his life and legacy.

AFSCME President Lee Saunders spoke of his decades-long friendship with Lucy, and what he hoped we would all learn from his example.

“What I think I’ll remember most about Bill was his grace, decency and integrity,” Saunders said. “But you would never mistake his even temperament

for complacency. Bill was a person of the deepest possible convictions — tenacious, passionate, fearless about speaking truth to power.”

Other labor leaders spoke about their admiration for Lucy.

Fred Redmond, the secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, said Lucy treated people with “dignity and respect—and he commanded dignity and respect in return.” He called Lucy “the conscience of the labor movement.”

The celebration of life closed with remarks from AFSCME’s current secretary-treasurer, Elissa McBride, who said Lucy “set the bar high for the secretary-treasurer role at AFSCME and to this day, you can see and feel his impact in the work that we do.”

“May each of us live up to his expectations and aspirations for our movement,” she said. “In words, courage, character and deeds.”

## Ending energy investments will harm Illinois communities

AS PART OF DISCUSSIONS around Congress’s disastrous budget reconciliation bill, House Republicans are floating the idea of completely ending the clean energy investments and tax credits included in the 2022

Inflation Reduction Act.

Should the federal government end these policies, it not only would set us further back in the transition to cleaner energy, but also dramatically impact the Illinois economy, eliminate good-paying union jobs and increase costs for Illinois

“Retirees, disabled individuals and the millions of beneficiaries who rely on Social Security should not need an X account to receive updates on the program.”

residents.


So far, the investments included in the IRA have “already spurred over \$300 billion in private-sector investment in clean energy and manufacturing,” writes Illinois AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Pat Devaney in an op-ed for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. This investment has already led to more than 117,000 new jobs across the country within the clean energy sector and is growing

by the day.

“Here in Illinois, new projects in Peoria, Joliet and Chicago’s South Side are revitalizing communities that have long been left behind in the energy economy, creating new job opportunities in wind, solar, battery storage and electric vehicle manufacturing,” Devaney continued.

The tax benefits included in the legislation have also led to vital savings for Illinois residents on their utility bills. Should the benefits be rescinded, Illinois residents can expect to see an increase of about 14% - roughly \$168 per month.

Illinois communities and residents, especially in the small towns and cities where clean energy investments have spurred major revitalization, cannot afford this disinvestment.

These projects—along with the jobs and revenue they bring to our local communities—should not be terminated. 



# RETIREE NOTES

## Social Security under attack; retirees stand up and fight back

WITH SOCIAL SECURITY squarely in his sights, billionaire Elon Musk is threatening the integrity of the Social Security Administration (SSA). Sweeping cuts by his so-called “DOGE” will make it more difficult for seniors to access benefits and customer support.

Musk has already closed dozens of SSA offices nationwide and fired thousands of employees. Under new policies spearheaded by Musk and the Trump administration, Social Security beneficiaries must undergo an identity verification process

which will require visiting an office in person, despite the closures and understaffing making in-person visits more difficult.

Seniors are already feeling the impacts of these reckless cuts. The SSA website has been crashing and phone calls are often going unanswered.

Musk is taking to his social media site to circulate false information, alleging that Social Security is rife with fraud and claiming without evidence that millions of people are wrongly getting benefits.

And it’s not just Musk trying to sow distrust of Social Security. Howard Lutnick, Trump’s Commerce Secretary and a billionaire businessman, said in an interview that only fraudsters call the Social Security office to complain when

they don’t get their benefits.

“Let’s say Social Security didn’t send out their checks this month, my mother-in-law—who’s 94—she wouldn’t call and complain,” Lutnick said. “She’d just think something is messed up and she’d get it next month. A fraudster always makes the loudest noise, screaming, yelling and complaining.”

You can be certain that Lutnick’s mother-in-law is not dependent on her Social Security check to pay her bills or put food on her table.

All these actions are part of a concerted effort by the Trump administration to make Social Security more difficult to access and less reliable for the seniors who depend on it.

“What Trump and Musk are trying to do is terrible,”



Chapter 31 retirees have been pushing for lower prescription drug prices for more than a year.



Retirees rallied for affordable drugs in Springfield before lobbying lawmakers in February.

said David Spinner, the president of AFSCME Retiree Sub-chapter 87. “Three area Social Security offices have been closed in Springfield, Decatur and Champaign, which makes it almost impossible to have face-to-face contact with a Social Security staff member.”

AFSCME has been fighting back. The international union filed a lawsuit against DOGE’s illegal access to the public’s personal data from the Social Security Administration. A federal judge agreed with AFSCME and temporarily blocked DOGE from continuing to access such personal data. The order also directed DOGE to delete any sensitive personal information already collected.

Chapter 31 Retirees have been on the front lines of the fight. In March, retiree leaders joined an AFSCME national leadership call to educate members on threats to Social Security, as well as proposed Medicaid cuts, the recent termination of federal employees, and other federal budget cuts. The action culminated with retirees making thousands of calls to their Members of Congress.

“Retirees need to unite and start to communicate the hazards that will come from these aggressive moves against the general public and senior citizens,” Spinner said.

This fight is sure to intensify in the coming months. Retirees nationwide need to prepare to stand up to defend the benefits that they’ve paid into their entire lives.


## Retirees keep the pressure on for affordable drugs

ON FEB. 25, AFSCME RETIREES gathered at the Capitol in Springfield to support House Bill 1443, which would establish an independent Prescription Drug Affordability Board to address the rising costs of prescription drug medications. They were joined by Citizen Action/Illinois and other advocates.

The Prescription Drug Affordability Board would assess and establish upper payment limits for prescription drugs throughout the supply chain. The board would also put price caps on drugs used to treat illnesses like cancer and diabetes.

“Prescription drugs don’t work if you can’t afford them,” said Norma Smolin, who serves on the executive board of Retiree Sub-chapter 162 and attended the lobby day.

Part of the Inflation Reduction Act passed by the Biden Administration helped lower costs of prescription medications for millions of Americans on Medicare. Now the Trump Administration has tried to freeze funds allocated by the Act.

Retirees must stay vigilant and work together in fighting against rising health care costs. AFSCME continues the fight for capping prices and lowering costs for prescription medications for all Illinoisans. 





## ON THE JOB

And the work can be fun. Every year we blow up a “volcano” with liquid nitrogen and water outside with the students to see how different parameters would affect people living in the radius of a volcano.

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“My philosophy is that we’re a community, and I can’t do things half-heartedly.”

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### Why did you get involved in your union?

When I converted to a civil service position, I immediately joined the union because I understand unions’ importance in supporting workers. I became more active around 2019-2020 during an 18-month contract negotiation, volunteering to help count votes and support leadership.

Later, after encouragement from our former chief steward, I became a steward myself. Not long after, I stepped into the chief steward role. I recognized that my flexible position gave me the privilege to take on this responsibility, and I felt I should use that to benefit others.

### How do you fight for your members as a steward?

I approach my role as a chief problem-solver. A steward bridges membership and the contract, helping people understand their rights and options in different situations.

There’s also a social worker aspect—making connections and helping members understand they’re not alone. Sometimes we can’t technically grieve an issue, but I can still provide support and suggest alternative approaches.

As a scientist, when something goes wrong in the lab, we address the immediate incident but then perform a root cause analysis to prevent recurrence. I try to bring that analytical approach to my steward role, using soft power and accountability to address underlying issues.

It’s gratifying to help people through difficult situations. My philosophy is that we’re a community, and I can’t do things half-heartedly. When I committed to being a steward, I committed to giving it my all.

It feels good to help people through crises, though I’m often frustrated that these situations arise in the first place. If administrators treated employees like human beings deserving of basic dignity, many issues could be avoided entirely. Sometimes I need to be the person who reminds them of that fundamental truth. 🦋

# Rebekah Fitchett

LABORATORY MANAGER

NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

AFSCME Local 1989

### Tell us about your job.

I am the earth science and environmental science lab manager for Northeastern Illinois University and the chief steward of AFSCME Local 1989. I started at NEIU in 2008 as an adjunct instructor, gradually taking on more lab coordination duties until 2018, when I officially became a full-time civil service lab manager.

As lab manager, I’m responsible for the safety of laboratory classrooms and research rooms. I ensure appropriate PPE for experiments, manage risk, and oversee lab setups and takedowns. My role includes inventory management, collections oversight, and broader organizational planning. I order supplies, coordinate with faculty about our needs, and work with facilities on maintenance issues. It’s a position with many different responsibilities.

### Why did you get into this line of work?

I earned my undergraduate degree in geology. I realized, “If I can understand these rocks, I can understand the entire history of the world and share that story with others.”

I am at heart an educator. Though I miss classroom teaching, I still fulfill that desire by supporting students’ education in different ways.

### What’s the best part of your job?

Many of our students are first-generation college students working incredibly hard in a system stacked against them. As someone with privilege, I believe I should use it to help them.

I was raised Quaker, which instilled strong values of community service and social justice. Using what advantages I have to help others was just what we did in my family—it wasn’t even questioned.