



ON THE

MOVE



Unstoppable: AFSCME Members Clear the Way

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ON THE MOVE

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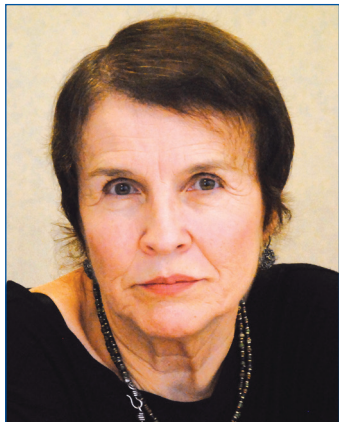
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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

We're on call for our communities...

...and our union



BY ROBERTA LYNCH

THAT'S THE AFSCME WAY.

When winter storm warnings start blasting out from every cell phone, TV, and radio in the vicinity, many folks start thinking about how they can hunker down or what precautionary measures they need to take.

But some AFSCME members are already out on the highways and byways, meeting the fearsome ice and snow head-on to help keep the rest of us safe. The city and county workers who operate snowplows and salt trucks allow us to get to work, school, medical appointments or the grocery store at far less risk of accidents or injuries.

And if another big winter hazard—frozen or broken water pipes—strikes a community, repair crews of city or county workers are ready to spring into action at any hour of the day or night.

That's the AFSCME way: We serve our communities, and we never quit.

Public works employees are storm warriors, first responders, roadside rescuers, emergency dispatchers, crisis interventionists, and much, much more.

When the call goes out, they are always prepared to answer.

AFSCME Council 31 includes local unions representing more than 100 different units of local government in Illinois, ranging in size from 20 workers to more than 2,000.

In some cases, their assistance is less tangible, but no less critical. Mental health counselors intervene when extreme behavior threatens others. Nursing home workers provide care for the community's elderly and ailing. Engineering employees work to prevent floods, and respond swiftly when flooding does occur. Law enforcement officers keep county jails secure and community streets safe. It's a list that could go on and on.

They are all on call for their communities.

Though all too often

“unsung”, they are all heroes nonetheless, everyday heroes who make every day better because of their skill and diligence. Heroes who deserve fairness and fundamental respect

It's pretty straightforward: Fairness means a family-sustaining wage, affordable and accessible health care, a secure retirement. Respect means decent and safe working conditions, reasonable hours of work, and a voice on the job to help determine how the work is done.

That's the AFSCME way. It's by coming together in our union, and continually building it stronger, that we ensure that our work is recognized, valued and rewarded.

Over the decades, we've made great progress in advancing those goals. But during the coronavirus pandemic—when public employees remained on the job, often at great personal risk—the contribution AFSCME members make became ever clearer and more appreciated.

In recent rounds of contract negotiations, AFSCME local unions across the state are winning unprecedented wage increases, as well as significant improvements in benefits and working conditions.

But the forces allied against us remain, and they are powerful.

One is the threat of privatization, when employers look to provide services on the cheap, without regard for quality. We've fought hard against the privatization of county nursing homes, city water systems and other basic public services that should remain in public hands.

Another threat is posed by attempts to weaken retirement security. Despite the fact that


the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund (which includes both cities and counties outside Chicago and Cook) is the only fully funded pension system in Illinois, some politicians continue to press for further cutting public employee pensions. When he was a state legislator, Darren Bailey—the former Republican candidate for governor who is now running for Congress—pushed to abolish the Illinois constitution's pension protection clause.

The attacks on the very existence of unions like ours continue, too. Dark-money groups like the Freedom Foundation are sending FOIA requests to local governments to garner personal, private information about union members—such as home address, phone number, age and more—in order to besiege you with pleas to drop your union membership.

We're mostly winning those battles on every front. This year we stopped the closure of the DeKalb County Nursing Home, then won the best contract ever there. We've blocked pension destruction bills like Darren Bailey's from ever seeing the light of day, while we're launching an effort to improve Tier 2 pensions. And AFSCME members are tearing up and tossing out the glossy, lie-filled mailers that the Freedom Foundation sends them.

But that doesn't mean all is well. The forces of division are working overtime to stir up hostility in our country—and that can all too easily spill over into our ranks.

Just as we never quit on our communities—doing the job every day to respond to the storms, floods, and other disasters that may come—so, too, we can never quit protecting, defending and deepening the unity and solidarity that are the bedrock of our union.

If we continue to lock arms together, to stand up for ourselves and for each other, and to serve and build our communities better, we will be the true heroes of our own story. 

“It stops now”

University employees turn up heat in contract campaigns

Across Illinois, university employees are at the forefront of a surge of energy and vigor, with multiple AFSCME university locals negotiating new contracts. Together, they’re taking strong action to demand an end to the low pay that’s a systemic problem on state university campuses.

University employees have faced increased challenges over the last decade. Former governor Bruce Rauner’s refusal to approve a budget led to layoffs at many universities. Then the pandemic came, resulting in layoffs for some food and building service workers. Those that remained were forced to do more with less, all while navigating the pandemic’s uncertain terrain.

“We’ve gone through all these difficult times, and we’ve seen no compensation for it,” said Kim Pope, president of AFSCME Local 981, which represents 180 workers at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). “For so much of the last decade, we’ve taken it on the chin. The sacrifices that we made are motivating us to fight more.”

Demanding better

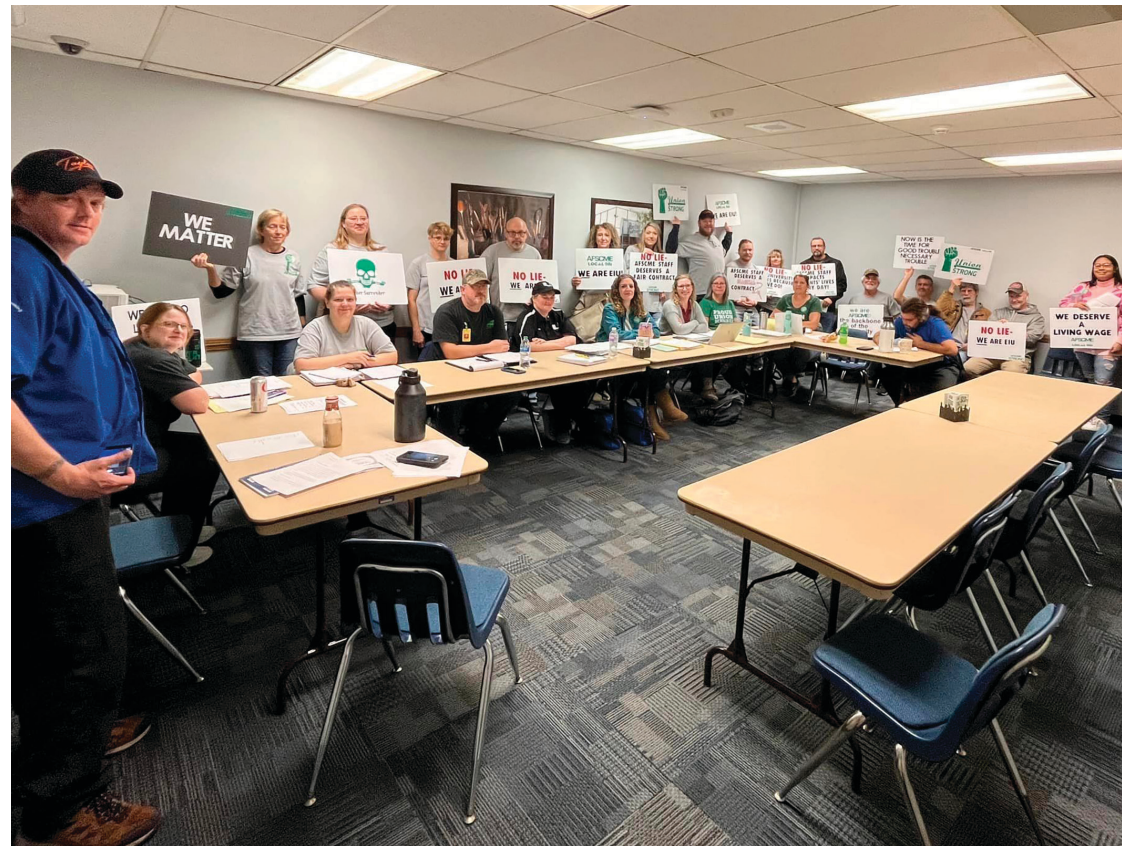
In September, researchers at the University of Illinois

released a report exploring the pay disparity between public university employees and their state employee counterparts doing similar work.

It found that university employees earn 21% less than state employees in similar jobs, and that state employees earn more on average than state university employees in 93% of the 69 researched titles. The lower pay hinders a university’s ability to attract, hire, and retain qualified workers serving campus communities.

Union members at state universities have decided they won’t take it anymore. They won’t accept the lack of respect and acknowledgement they’re shown. They won’t accept meager wage proposals that management slides across the bargaining table, while the upper echelons of university management get exorbitant pay increases and bonuses.

“If the chancellors and



Local 981 back their bargaining committee as it prepares to meet with management.

president are getting stipends for jobs well done, then maybe they need to stop patting themselves on the back, and maybe they need to start looking at the people like us that are working hard to make this university look good,” said Julie LaTempt-Brazier, the president of AFSCME Local 2887 at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. “We are a valuable resource and we’ve been grossly overlooked for years—and it stops now.”

Taking action

AFSCME members’ determination is manifesting itself on campuses in an onslaught of pickets, public speak-outs and other workplace actions that are keeping the demand for fair pay front and center.

After nearly two years at the bargaining table, members of Locals 2887 and 2232 at SIUE have grown frustrated with management’s tone-deafness when discussing wages. As a result, LaTempt-Brazier said, the energy in their contract campaign is unlike anything she’s ever seen. People from different unions on campus are talking to, coordinating with, and helping each other. Importantly, their communities have rallied to their side.

Together with their coworkers, they’re also coordinating with AFSCME Local 370 at the SIU School of Medicine in Springfield and Local 878 at SIU-Carbondale, they are attending the university board of trustees meetings to voice their frustrations directly to the board. Dozens of union members with signs fill the audience, and one by one, local union leaders stand at the podium and deliver impassioned statements about their service to their university, and why they deserve more.

“The fight is difficult, but it’s brought us closer together,” LaTempt-Brazier said. “We’re leaning on each

other more. We’re continuing to get energy from each other.”

At EIU, the union has worked to educate the students and other union members on campus about the problems facing the building maintenance and food service workers it represents.

At a bargaining session soon after a large action on campus, union members lined the halls leading to the meeting room with signs as management walked towards the meeting. The message was clear: We’re not backing down.

Some university employees are already seeing success. AFSCME Local 1890, which represents clerical and administrative employees at Northern Illinois University, won a new contract with 8% in raises over two years, and lump-sum payments ranging from \$800 to \$1,150 based on seniority. Their counterparts in AFSCME Local 963, which represents NIU’s building service workers, are still fighting at the bargaining table.

Even after so many actions and so much effort, university employees insist they’re just getting started.

“We’re closer to the end than we are to the beginning,” LaTempt-Brazier said. “That’s what’s propelling us forward right now. The solidarity on display makes us feel like we can take on anyone. It’s solidarity to the highest factor.”



Locals 2887 and 2232 at SIU-Edwardsville stage a picket outside a university building.

Momentum for DSP raises continues in 2024

Last year, direct support professionals (DSPs) who care for people with disabilities in community agencies fought for and won their largest legislative allocation for wage increases—\$2.50 per hour—in history. It was the 6th straight year AFSCME members have successfully raised wages by lobbying state lawmakers.

DSPs met with legislators in their districts, called their offices, and finally, descended on the Capitol itself to tell lawmakers about the work they do and why it's so important.

Now, that momentum is carrying forward. In the spring legislative session, AFSCME will again support legislation to raise the wages of DSPs, and those who work in direct care are preparing to participate in the efforts to win it.

"Legislation raising wages for DSPs will only succeed if as many DSPs as possible make their voices heard," said Council 31 Regional Director Doug Woodson, who leads the annual effort to increase DSP wages. "That means signing the

petition that will be rolling out soon, participating in your local's call-in days, and heading to Springfield in May to lobby legislators directly in the Capitol."

AFSCME fights back against proposed reimbursement cuts

The Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) announced last year that it would be reducing the total number of DSP hours funded for some individuals in nonprofit agencies

The proposed decrease in the reimbursement of hours will not affect the amount that employees are paid for their work. Nor will it directly affect the number of hours they will



DSPs celebrate at the state Capitol after successfully lobbying legislators for wage increases in 2019.

work or the \$2.50 per hour wage increase they fought for and won. However, the reduction of hours would result in a loss in revenue for some provider agencies.

The plan stirred opposition from just about every quarter, forcing the department to postpone its implementation.

AFSCME has been fighting back against the proposed cuts, urging the department to revise

the funding calculations they use to ensure there is no reduction in funding for community disability services.

In a letter to Dulce Quintero, the DHS secretary, Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch urged the department to reconsider.

"Most of the DSP workforce in community agencies is made up of women and people of color," Lynch wrote. "The state

relies on them to deliver services and care for some of our most vulnerable residents. When DSP hours are cut, it impacts the financial stability of DSPs, as well as their families and communities."

In meetings with legislators, providers, and advocacy organizations, Council 31 is continuing to press the department to reverse course and cancel the cuts. 

Local 1019 member's startling discovery spurs new research

Dr. Meredith Mahoney, a zoologist at the Illinois State Museum in Springfield and a steward for AFSCME Local 1019, has made a surprising discovery which became a launchpad for significant research into an invasive insect.

One day in 2022, Mahoney noticed her normally sleepy cat, Darcy, batting around an insect on the floor. She had to take a closer look.

"It was this big bug," Mahoney said. "It had a very striking appearance, it was all black and had this pattern around the edge of its body."

Mahoney knew what it was: A South American insect called a triatomine—more commonly known as a kissing bug. Kissing bugs are a menace to communities in Latin America. They hunt at night, seeking out

the faces of warm mammals. Once there, they clamp down and suck their blood.

What's worse, they can transmit a parasite that causes Chagas disease, which, in its mildest form, causes fever, headaches and swelling, but can advance to cause heart disease, digestive complications and possibly nerve damage. In rare cases, the disease can be lethal.

Until now, kissing bugs weren't widely known to be present in the generally colder climates of North America.

But a warming planet could be

creating new habitat for the species to migrate north.

Mahoney's discovery led to a joint project between researchers at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville and St. Louis University. They teamed up to study where and how often the bugs have been found in Illinois and Missouri.

"We used all these available resources to try to build up an idea of where the bugs are, and now we can understand in the future if the disease is actually present in Illinois and Missouri," Mahoney said. "There are some documented specimens in Missouri where the disease has been found. Now, this research is the baseline."

The Illinois State Museum's collections—which are cataloged and maintained by members of AFSCME Local 1019—proved to be a valuable resource for the research.


"We can use museum



Mahoney with some of the Illinois State Museum's insect specimens.

collections like the ones here at the state museum to understand a lot of modern problems," Mahoney said. "We learned that we have a lot of other kissing bugs in our collection. We learned we already had some specimens in the area. So museum collections can be of interest to human life, health and medicine as well. When we

keep the specimens in our collection, they have the ability to answer questions in the future."

While they do not currently pose a major threat, Mahoney advised anyone who finds a kissing bug in their home to put it in a sealed container, freeze it, and report the contact to the Illinois Department of Public Health. 



AFSCME Recommendations: 2024 Primary Elections

AFSCME PEOPLE has announced recommendations for the 2024 primary elections.

The recommendations are based on the work of the AFSCME International Executive Board, the Illinois PEOPLE Conference, and the work of Area PEOPLE committees comprised of local union members, who arrived at their recommendations after examining voting records, reviewing questionnaires and conducting interviews to determine where the candidates stand on the issues that matter to AFSCME members.

Through that process, these candidates have emerged as people who share the values that are important to union members and will stand up for the rights of workers.

Our votes can make a difference.

Early voting begins in most places on Feb. 8.

Election day is Tuesday, March 19.

Note: AFSCME does not typically endorse in uncontested races.

President

Joe Biden (D)

Judicial

1st District Supreme Court:

Joy Virginia Cunningham (D)

3rd District Appellate Court:

Joe Hettel (D)

Congress

4th District: Jesús “Chuy” García (D)

5th District: Mike Quigley (D)

6th District: Sean Casten (D)

7th District: Danny Davis (D)

11th District: Bill Foster (D)

State Senate

40th District: Patrick Joyce (D)

58th District: Terri Bryant (R)

State House

4th District: Lilian Jiménez (D)

5th District: Kimberly Du Buclet (D)

6th District: Sonya Harper (D)

21st District: Abdelnasser Rashid (D)

22nd District: Angie Guerrero-Cuellar (D)

23rd District: Edgar Gonzalez, Jr. (D)

24th District: Theresa Mah (D)

27th District: Justin Slaughter (D)

29th District: Thaddeus Jones (D)

31st District: Mary Flowers (D)

32nd District: Cyril Nichols (D)

35th District: Mary Gill (D)

36th District: Rick Ryan (D)

79th District: Billy Morgan (D)

83rd District: Matt Hanson (D)

110th District: Matthew Hall (R)

Chicago Real Estate Transfer Tax Referendum

Vote **YES**

Kendall County

Circuit Clerk: Matthew G. Prochaska (R)

Jefferson County Board

7th District: Jeffery Nowland (R)



Local 3280 keeps memory of historic strike alive

When AFSCME Local 3280 does their new employee orientations, they spend a great portion of it talking about the history of their workplace and of their local union.

They have good reason to want to keep the past in mind. If it wasn't for what their local accomplished in the mid-1990s, members' lives would look much different today.

When the Illinois Veterans' Home at Anna opened in 1994, it was built with state funds, but—unlike other state veterans' homes—the facility was operated by a private contractor. Bonnie Brimm, the longtime president of Local 3280 and its current vice president, started at the home on the day it opened and has been there ever since.

"It was horrible," Brimm said of those early days. "We were at-will employees. If the boss didn't like the way you looked that day, you were in

to make all of that money. To think someone could be so selfish that they couldn't pay a decent wage, and be so greedy that they had to make all of that money."

Anna Marie Aumiller, the current president of Local 3280, started at the home in May 1996. She made just \$130 per week (\$270 in today's dollars) as a certified nurse's assistant—hardly enough to feed herself, never mind her 2-year-old son.

"It was the only job I had ever had," Aumiller said. "I had heard of unions, but I didn't know what they were all about."

She was about to learn. Workers had organized almost immediately after the home



The moment the six day-shift workers walked out of the home, officially beginning the strike.

out with hands clasped and heads held high. Lining the road were their fellow union members—not just from their local, but AFSCME members from across the region who came to support them. Members of other unions were there, too, along with leaders of the local veterans' groups disturbed by what they had heard about working conditions at the home.

The strike wasn't easy. Workers walked the picket line every day for six weeks. Other local unions and businesses in the community donated food and groceries to help ease their financial burden.

It took a toll on the workers, but a far bigger toll on the employer. Back at the table, the bargaining team kept pushing. Eventually, they secured increased wages for every employee. Direct care staff who were making as little as \$4.50 an hour received a pay increase to \$8.50 an hour. They won a health care plan with the employer paying 90% of the premium costs. The workers also won paid time off and double time for holidays.

The strike was over, but their fight wasn't. Their first contract fixed many of the issues that they faced, but they knew as long as a private company ran the home, more issues down the road were all but certain.

So AFSCME launched a legislative campaign to make the Anna veterans' home a state-operated facility, garnering support from legislators

throughout the region. And the workers won again: In 2003 the bill passed, making them state employees with all the benefits of the AFSCME state contract, including step increases, health insurance and a pension.


Keeping the memory alive

Of the 38 members who walked the strike line in the summer of 1996, five are still working at the home. Their memories of the strike and the abysmal working conditions that preceded it have not faded. They want younger members to know what they had to go through—what life at the Anna veterans' home was

like—before the union, when they made just \$130 per week with mouths to feed, and worked every day in fear of being fired any time for any reason.

Whenever a new employee starts at the home, Aumiller pulls up a YouTube video that recounts the strike.

"We show it so they can see how important the union is," Aumiller said. "We would have nothing without the union. It's to show how important it is to not let management walk all over you, how important it is to stand up for yourself."

"We started with nothing and we've got a lot today," Brimm said. "But we'd still have nothing if we didn't walk out that day." 



Many of the veterans home workers were women and single mothers.

trouble. The wages were terrible. We didn't even have paid holidays."

Dismal working conditions and terrible wages immediately birthed a push to form a union. That year they made it official when 100% of the bargaining-unit employees voted to join AFSCME.

Anger over wages and working conditions simmered. When the union obtained public records showing how profitable the home was, it boiled over.

"They were making fistfuls of money off our backs," Brimm said. "And it was because they were paying us so horribly that they were able

opened, and by the time Aumiller arrived, bargaining the first contract was underway. In short order, management announced they had made their last and best offer—an offer that amounted to almost nothing. Just three months later, 100% of the 38 AFSCME members—many of them single moms—voted to authorize a strike.

Walking out

That strike began at 10 a.m. on Aug. 10, 1996, when Brimm and her five co-workers on the day shift said goodbye to the residents, clocked out and handed in their badges.

The six employees walked

Scan the QR code to watch a YouTube video recapping the strike!



Capital improvements lag in IDOC

AFSCME members say delays are often inexplicable

The state Capital Development Board is sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for much-needed building repairs and improvements to state correctional facilities, but AFSCME members who work in the Illinois Department of Corrections say that money doesn't translate into action quickly enough.

For fiscal year 2023, DOC had a total of \$375 million in appropriations earmarked for repairs and improvements. But only 7% of that money was spent.

Inoperable and inadequate dietary equipment, unsafe and unreliable locking systems, leaky roofs, and failing water, wastewater, and electrical systems threaten the department's ability to maintain minimum standards that ensure the safety and health of both staff and individuals in custody.

Meanwhile, even basic maintenance has become a struggle. At Logan Correctional Center, heat and sewers have become an issue. At Menard Correctional Center, the kitchen's roof has been

leaking for months. Workers have had to deploy two-dozen milk crates lined with trash bags to catch water dripping from the ceiling.

Most facilities have already hired contractors to do the work, but projects are slow to get off the ground. For 23 projects that were in progress at the beginning of 2023, by year's end there was no change in obligations owed to contractors, indicating no meaningful progress was made on those projects.

The glacial pace of improvements is causing growing concern among AFSCME members who work in state prisons that are already inherently unsafe. Fear that the roof could collapse any minute adds another layer of danger and

stress.

The Capital Development Board is the body that approves projects and disburses funds to the facilities to get them done. But AFSCME members like Rick Hepp, president of AFSCME Local 1175 at Menard Correctional Center, say that the board is too slow and out of step with the most urgent facility needs.

"In the chain of events between a project being approved and work being completed, the work itself is the quickest and easiest part," Hepp said. "How crazy is that?"

At Menard, the slow pace of repairs is creating real security concerns. A clogged drainpipe with no fix in sight means that some of the individuals in custody have to use the employee bathroom, compromising security measures at this maximum-security facility.

But security concerns aren't the only thing giving the members of AFSCME Local 1175 at Menard headaches. The air conditioning has been broken for nearly a year in several buildings, including the employee kitchen.

"The heat can just be unbearable," said Hepp. "In the summer, we have to endure that day in and day out. There's nowhere we can go to escape the heat."

Logan CC has 15 projects scheduled, ranging from security repairs like replacing lock controls and exterior security doors, to basic improvements or maintenance like the installation of a walk-in freezer and mold remediation. Of the \$20.7 million earmarked for all of the major projects at Logan, the facility has only spent \$2.9 million.

An underground sewer line has been leaking for at least two years. While the department has approved plans and the money to fix it, the project has gone almost nowhere in the last year. The sum of \$200,000 was appropriated for the emergency sewer repairs; from December 2022 to November 2023, the facility only spent \$19,000, for a total of \$39,000.


"All these projects are approved, and they've got the money," said Ken Johnson, president of AFSCME Local 2073 at Logan. "So what are they waiting for?"

The underground steam

pipes that heat Logan are leaking in several places throughout the facility. When the heat went out in the administrative offices, the union had to buy space heaters on its own dime to keep the workers in the office warm. In one spot in the yard, they've been advised by maintenance crews that it may be unsafe to even walk on the ground because the leaks have created cavities underneath the soil.

And the list of maintenance projects keeps growing.

The amount of money dedicated to repairing and updating facilities in DOC is inadequate to address needed repairs, nor is it keeping pace with the rising costs of unaddressed maintenance needs. Deferred maintenance needs at state facilities grow by an estimated \$500 million per year.

"These delays are totally inexcusable," said Council 31 Regional Director Eddie Caumiant. "The department needs to be held accountable, both in Springfield and at the local level. Local unions are already pressing these issues in labor-management meetings, but we need to keep the pressure on." 



FAIR TIER 2: THE

Tier 2 is fundamentally unfair

In 2010, over fierce opposition from AFSCME and other unions, the Illinois General Assembly enacted legislation which created a separate tier of lower pension benefits for virtually every Illinois public employee hired on or after Jan. 1, 2011. This so-called Tier 2 benefit was touted as a way to slow the growth of unfunded liabilities across the pension systems, but in reality, its inequities betrayed the promise of a fair, secure retirement after a career in service to the public.

Tier 2 participants make the same level of employee contributions as Tier 1 participants, but their retirement benefit calculation and retirement security are inferior in significant ways.

The changes to benefits for Tier 2 employees include:

- Tier 2 increased the vesting requirement for workers by two years. This means that Tier 2 participants must now work 10 years for an employer before their pension benefits are guaranteed. If an employee leaves prior to 10 years of service, they are only eligible for refund of their individual contributions.
- Tier 2 increased the retirement age to qualify for full benefits by up to seven years, depending on the employer. Most Tier

2 employees must work until age 67 to receive their normal retirement benefit, whereas their Tier 1 peers can retire at age 60. (Retirement ages are lower for those in law enforcement.)

- Tier 2 reduced the final average salary (FAS) calculation from the average of the highest four years of salary to the average of the highest eight years of salary. FAS is important because it is a factor used to determine the initial pension benefit for a retiree. By reducing the FAS calculation for a Tier 2 participant, the pension benefit they are eligible for is cut significantly.
- Tier 2 cut the annual benefit increases in retirement from 3% to the lesser of 3% or one-half of the consumer price index. For those systems where the annual increase was calculated on a compounded basis (i.e., the increase was calculated on the prior year's benefit level), Tier 2 changed it such that the annual increases are on a simple interest basis. This means that the annual percent increase is always based on the initial pension amount. This change dramatically limits the ability of retirement income to keep up with rising costs throughout a person's retirement.

Understanding the challenges

The financial health of a retirement system is measured by the extent to which the assets on hand cover the cost of the pension benefits earned by workers. Ideally, an employer's annual pension contribution should be calculated based on benefit costs and unfunded liabilities. Such practices, however, have not been followed in Illinois, as the state and local governments have skimmed on their pension contributions for decades as a strategy to balance their annual budgets. Rather than raising taxes and other revenue to cover the cost of government operations, inadequate pension contributions became the norm.

Those decades of inadequate contributions left almost all Illinois pension funds among the worst funded in the United States. The unfunded liability of the state's five retirement systems (SERS, SURS, TRS, General Assembly, Judges) was a combined \$142.3 billion as of June 30, 2023. These funds were, on average, 44.6% funded, meaning they had the assets on hand to cover less than half of earned pension benefits. The unfunded liability across the four City of Chicago retirement funds (MEABF, Police, Fire, Laborers) stands at \$35 billion, with those systems being some of the lowest-funded in the country.

Pension funding laws have been passed that increased employer funding of the retirement systems, with most on track to reach 90% funded by 2045. The state's FY 2024 pension contribution for the five systems was nearly \$11 billion and is expected to increase to \$12.5 billion by 2030. The city of Chicago had a required contribution of \$2.4 billion in FY 2024.

It's a heavy lift to increase the health of the pension systems across Illinois, as employer pension contributions now make up a significant portion of budgets. There is a challenge in ensuring that state and local governments have the revenue to pay the contributions needed to improve the funding level of pension systems while making adequate investments in public services.

Any new costs associated with benefit improvements on top of the budgetary strain from pension legacy debt will be used by opponents to argue against any fixes to the unfair Tier 2 system in Illinois. However, modernizing the state's tax structure could allow Tier 2 improvements without jeopardizing the financial stability of the pension funds or government budgets.

TIER 1 VS. TIER 2 BY THE NUMBERS

0 Difference in employee pension contributions between Tier 1 and Tier 2

7 The number of additional years most Tier 2 employees have to work to collect an unreduced benefit

6% The reduction in the Tier 2 initial benefit

20% The reduction in Tier 2 retirement income over 20 years

PATH FORWARD



Chyaire Brown

Child Protection Advanced Specialist, Department of Children and Family Services

AFSCME Local 2794

To me it's unjust because of what I do at DCFS, my job is mentally challenging. There's a lot of vicarious trauma we go through from the things we see and the things we deal with. I'm 43 years old right now and I won't be able to retire for more than two decades. I'm going to be mentally exhausted with what I do and the trauma I go through every day and what I do to help these clients, it's not fair to me. My wish is that lawmakers think about the families we help every day. We're here to help our community. That's what we do. That's what our department is about, helping families. All we're asking for is legislators to help us as well.



John Day

Revenue Collection Officer III, Illinois Department of Revenue

AFSCME Local 1048

I started with the State in 2012 which means I was a Tier 2 employee surrounded by Tier 1 coworkers. When a conversation drifted to retirement, I'd share that I was on Tier 2 and my brothers and sisters in Tier 1 would grimace. We all knew Tier 2 was bad and I knew I was contributing the same percentage of my wages for a worse benefit. I was 28 when I started and turning 67 was 39 years away, so it took me a while to even look up how bad Tier 2 was. Over the years I've heard co-workers talk about how they've stuck around because the pension benefits were good, and I'd witness my co-workers retire in their 50s. That's just not the case for Tier 2 employees like me.



Cody Dornes

Correctional Counselor II, East Moline Correctional Center

AFSCME Local 46

Tier 2 is just unfair, that's the biggest thing. You can have two employees doing the same job working side by side and one gets to retire at 50 and the other at 60. It's not fair or equal. Working for Corrections, this is a safety issues. We cannot have 60-year-old men and women, running around a prison, responding to emergencies, breaking up fights. Especially not after they've been doing that for 30 or 40 years. I don't think we should wait and see how dangerous that turns out to be. I think we need to act now.



Joel Gonzalez

Maintenance Electrician, Fox Metropolitan Water Reclamation District

AFSCME Local 3297

The fact that you have to wait until 62 at the earliest to retire doesn't sound great to me. People in Tier 1 get to have the option to retire by 55 and I would like to have that same option. Our job is physically demanding. I don't feel like anybody in this field of work, their bodies are going to be able to hold up as long to be able to work until they're 62 or 65. It can be a strenuous physical job and I don't think it's fair to people that they have to do that same type of work when they should be safely retired. Not to mention the potential medical issues having to do that type of work for that long can cause.



Wendy Renteria

Chief Deputy Auditor, LaSalle County

AFSCME Local 978

The future of our workforce is constantly changing. We need to make pensions attractive to incoming employees just for the sake of retaining them. We have high turnover right now and one of the things we hear is that the pension is not that great. People don't want to work until they're 67, and you can't blame them. Our work can be challenging, and if people don't feel like the Tier 2 benefits are worth a lifetime of difficult work, they're not going to stick around. Lowering the retirement age gives people the opportunity to live their lives without worry.



Anthony Walraven

Emergency Telecommunicator, City of Peoria

AFSCME Local 3464-1

My job is in emergency services—it's high-stress and fast-paced. I'm faced with the prospect of being in my mid-60s and still doing this job. I worry that I'm going to put 25 years into helping other people and serving my community and I'm going to die working, or I'm going to have to work so long that my retirement is just a couple years of health and years of sickness. That's not what a pension was supposed to be for working people. If you had a pension, that meant that you could enjoy your life in your retirement years. Tier 2 has taken some of that promise away for me.

GIVING BACK



Local unions throughout the state get into the holiday spirit each year by performing acts of community service for the communities they call home.



Warm winter coats in East Moline

More than 80 students in East Moline schools got new winter coats thanks to the combined efforts of AFSCME Locals 46 (East Moline Correctional Center), 2025 (Rock Island County) and 2040 (East Moline School District). The locals worked together to raise money to buy an assortment of coats for students in need.



Rockford school employees come together for students

AFSCME Local 1275, which represents bus drivers and nutritional service workers at the Rockford Public Schools District,

organized a coat drive for students in need. Altogether, they were able to give nearly 200 students coats, hats and winter gloves.

Local 473 recognized for “Shop with a Cop” participation

Local 473, which represents workers in Winnebago County, has been a steady presence in the local police department’s Shop with a Cop program for years now. Members of the local collected \$5,000 in donations for the program, and received a plaque from the Winnebago County Sheriff congratulating them on their local’s charitableness.



Meet Clayten White, one of AFSCME’s youngest members

He may be young, but Clayten White has already found a fulfilling career where he can grow and advance.

White is an 18-year-old cadet-in-training at Lawrence Correctional Center. He’s had other jobs in his young working life—he was previously a carpenter building houses and barns—but he’s found a job in the Illinois Department of Corrections in which he sees a future.

He always knew he wanted to go into law enforcement. So last year when his brother got a job at Lawrence and told him all about the impressive pay and benefits, White put an application in himself.

He attended his first ever union meeting shortly before Christmas, where he got a look inside the union work that is so important, especially in corrections. White said he plans to attend all the future union meetings he can.

“I thought it was unique seeing how they can better the prison environment,” White said. “And it’s nice knowing that you’ve got someone behind you if something happens.”

One of the first issues of *On the Move* he received featured his local president, Jeremy Givens, discussing the promotional opportunities through the Upward Mobility Program. He was pleased to learn that there are options to advance available to him through his union contract, and White said he plans to take advantage of them after he settles in.



ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

Pay increases follow victory over privatization

THE MEMBERS OF AFSCME Local 3537 at the DeKalb County Nursing Home fought a multi-year fight against the privatization of their beloved public nursing home, finally prevailing last fall.

Publicly owned and operated for 170 years, the county home came under threat from a County Board plan to sell it off to a for-profit buyer. Staff and residents alike were concerned about the implications of transitioning the public good into a tool to extract money from its elderly residents.

After AFSCME raised concerns about the reputation and checkered history of the would-be buyer, the sale was terminated by a state review board.

With the wind from that victory in their sails, the local entered negotiations for a new contract. They sought wage increases to help foster better recruitment and retention, along with fairer treatment for staff.

“It feels like a new day at the DeKalb County Nursing Home.”

Just two months later, they inked a new three-year contract that raises pay by an average of 24.1%.

“I think this contract is fantastic with the wages,” said Chuck Simpson, the president of Local 3537 and a restorative aide at the home. “It feels like a new day at the DeKalb County Nursing Home. We opened the door for people to want to come work here.”

High on their priority list was reducing the home’s reliance on CNAs from staffing agencies, and to set wages for those titles high enough for the county to hire and retain its own CNAs. They succeeded, with wages for CNAs increasing by 14.9% in each of the first two years of the contact.

“To fight to save that nursing home, then to get a fantastic contract on top of it, it does feel like good things are coming our way,” Simpson said. “When we start getting more residents



Members of Local 3537 at the DeKalb County Nursing Home.

and staff, we’re going to be doing great.”

They also won new and improved rules around overtime and paid time off. Under the former policy, if swapping shifts with a co-worker put one of their members into overtime, the county only paid the regular rate. Under the new language, the county will work with employees to find shift swaps that don’t lead to overtime, but if there are none available, overtime will be paid.

Additionally, management can no longer issue blanket denials for vacation requests made around holidays. The new language acknowledges that holidays can make staffing difficult, but as long as staffing is adequate, requests can’t be denied.

The contract was ratified unanimously. The bargaining committee included Simpson, Mike Brock and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Erik Thorson.

Ray Graham DSPs secure bonus from new funds

MEMBERS OF AFSCME LOCAL 3492 who support people with disabilities at the Ray Graham Association in the Chicago suburbs have ratified a new memorandum of understanding that pays out the state’s new regionalization increases.

Regionalization factors are set by the Illinois Department of Human Services based on the cost of living in each

region. Local unions representing direct-support personnel (DSPs) can bargain over how they are paid out.

At Ray Graham, that amounted to an 11.4% increase to base pay going forward. The increase is retroactive to July 7, 2023, meaning that all DSPs got a lump-sum payment applying that increase to all hours worked—including overtime—for the previous six months.

Non-DSP personnel in the bargaining unit also received a retroactive payment equal to a 5% increase to their base pay which is also applied to all of their future hourly rates.

“It looks like this year is more promising than ever to all the members,” said Timothy Olaosebikan, the president of Local 3492. “We’re all very happy and they’re ready to go to the next chapter in terms of campaigning for the DSP wage increase.”

Local 3492 is still at the bargaining table with management over how to apply the \$2.50 per hour wage increase funding that DSPs helped to win by lobbying state legislators. The state stipulates that half that amount must be applied to the base wage rates of all frontline employees, while there is more more discretion in applying the other half, so long as it too goes to wages.

The Local 3492 bargaining committee included Olaosebikan, Kevin Lane, Yma Young, Barb Hanzl, Emma Lane, Audrey Lake, Christine Rivera, Lenora Williams, Lisa Hymon and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Kathy Steichen.

The agreement also raises starting wages, which will help improve staffing.

“Raising the starting wage will attract more workers. Obtaining larger wage increases for current workers rewards loyalty and years of service,” Local 4008 President James Sitati said. “We’re glad that in this negotiation, we were able to start to accomplish both goals.”

The bargaining committee consisted of Sitati, Eytayo Arikebi, Rosalind Wakefield, Daniel Okafor and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Robert Holt.

Niles library employees win first contract

EMPLOYEES OF THE NILES-MAINE DISTRICT LIBRARY have their first union contract, and along with it, significant wage increases and—for the first time—paid parental leave.

AFSCME members at the library voted unanimously to ratify the agreement. On Nov. 15, the library board approved it as well, on a 7-0 vote.

Under the agreement, employees with at least one year of service will see their wages go up at least 5% to as much as 34% immediately, and up at least 12.5% to as much as 46.5% over three years, with the largest increases going to the lowest-paid employees.

(continued on page 12)

Securing legislative wage increase and more

SETTLING A WAGE REOPENER shortly before the holiday season, more than 200 DSPs and other direct care workers at the Little City Foundation in suburban Chicago—members of AFSCME Local 4008—secured the \$2.50 legislative wage increase and then some.

For DSPs in the residential and day programs, the total hourly increase is \$3.25 per hour. For DSPs working in children’s group homes, total pay increased by \$3 per hour.



AFSCME members at the Niles-Maine District Library during a “Green Day.”

ON THE LOCAL LEVEL (CONTINUED)

In addition to laying out costs for health care, ensuring predictable schedules, and establishing a grievance procedure, the contract also creates the library's first-ever paid parental leave benefit.

"People who are fairly paid feel respected and can just focus on serving the community. That will make it much easier to hire and keep people," said Todd Miller, a digital services librarian and a member of the bargaining committee. "It's been a long time coming, but it has all been worth it. The whole bargaining unit is excited to enter a new day for the library."

"It's been a long time coming, but it has all been worth it."

The first contract is the latest in a string of victories for Niles library employees, who formed their union in June 2021 in response to a hostile takeover of the elected board by individuals who aimed to undermine library programs and services.

Workers gained support from allied groups such as The Niles Coalition, among elected officials, and from the community at large.

They took action to stop the worst of the board's threatened budget cuts, weathered a two-year hiring freeze and the loss of a beloved library director, and earlier this year mobilized to retake a majority on the board for candidates who value library services.

Now they've won a union contract that will improve employee pay, benefits and rights at work—all of which will in turn make the library better able to serve the public.

"I think of a library as a three-legged stool, with patrons, administration and staff. Without a union, the staff side can be wobbly. With our union, it'll make the library stronger as a whole," said Cate Levinson, a youth services librarian who served on the union's bargaining committee. "With fairer



The members of Local 2817-2 in the city of Columbia emergency services department.

wages and better treatment, the library workers that our community knows and trusts are more likely to stay here."

Columbia EMS makes progress on several fronts

BEFORE THE 28 PARAMEDICS and EMTs of AFSCME Local 2817-2 in the city of Columbia started bargaining a new contract last fall, they got together as a union to identify their priorities. One that kept coming up was raising wages to improve retention and help recruit qualified candidates.

Another big item on the bargaining to-do list was securing equalized pay for each paycheck. Because they rotate between "short weeks" where they work 46 hours and "long weeks" where they work 70 or more hours, paychecks fluctuated, complicating personal finances and throwing off the rate of vacation accrual.

Ensuring that new employees could accrue

ENDURING FRIGID TEMPS FOR THEIR COMMUNITY

When a water main burst in the early hours of the morning, city of Ottawa employees in AFSCME Local 2819 sprung into action. Battling brutally cold wind chill of -30 degrees Fahrenheit and large amounts of ice from the ruptured pipe, they were able to fix the broken water main before many in their community had even woken up.



vacation early on—difficult under their previous contract—was another goal intended to make hiring new workers easier.

In the end, they achieved their top priority: raising wages. In their new contract, the average wage for full-time paramedics increased by 16%. For a part-time EMT, the increase was 17% and 18% for part-time paramedics.

“We’ve heard people saying, ‘Wow, you’re paying that much for part-timers?’” said EMT Michael Evans, who served on the union bargaining committee. “Word is starting to get around, which is great to hear.”

They were also able to fix the problem of unequal paychecks. Under the new contract, annual pay is equalized so each paycheck is roughly the same size. Plus, they made progress on vacation accrual for new hires. Going forward, all new hires will get 48 hours of vacation time beginning on their very first day.

And to help ensure that anyone interested in a lateral move to Columbia’s

ON THE PICKET LINE FOR FAIR PAY

Members of AFSCME Local 370 at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine in Springfield hit the picket line in December to call attention to management’s meager proposals on pay. Local 370 represents more than 700 clinical and administrative employees at the hospital.



Members of Local 1748 during their contract ratification meetings.

emergency response team can do so painlessly, the agreement provides that employees with up to five years of experience in another department can hire immediately at the step equivalent with their experience.

The contract was ratified unanimously.

The bargaining committee, led by Council 31 Staff Representative Matthew Whalen, included Evans and Pat Battoe.

Local 1748 raises wage floor

JUST IN TIME FOR THE holidays, the members of AFSCME Local 1748 who work in the McHenry County Clerk’s office secured a new contract with much-needed wage increases.

Minimum pay goes up 22%, a significant increase for the local’s lowest-paid members.

The local also wanted to make sure the policy around breaks was fair to workers. The previous lack of an official policy about lost break time was often used against them.

“Management would say, if you missed one of your breaks, that’s your own fault and you lost that break,” said Brittany Duffey, a clerk III and member of the bargaining committee. “Making sure that can’t happen anymore is something we fought for. Now, if you do miss a break at your scheduled time, you can still take it later on.”

They were also looking out for their union’s smallest constituency: the one bilingual clerk who is called upon to translate anytime there was a Spanish-speaking customer. Fighting for her rights at the table, they won a bilingual pay provision giving her an additional \$1,200 per year for that extra work.

The Local 1748 bargaining committee included Duffey, Katherine Leake, Jackie Warner, and was led by Council 31 Staff Representative Crystal Alonzo.

SHORT REPORTS



Staff assault at Dixon CC

FOUR CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS were injured at Dixon Correctional Center in an attack on Jan. 17.

The incident began as one officer was escorting the individual back to his cell when he spun around and struck the officer in the face. When other officers rushed to his aid, the offender grabbed a toilet plunger and swung it like a baseball bat, striking one officer in the face before he was restrained.

Four officers sustained head injuries. Three required

outside medical attention.

This is the 37th assault on staff at Dixon since June 30. In those incidents, 82 staff have been the victims of assaults.

Meanwhile, the facility has been lagging in its efforts to hire. Budgeted for 635 security staff, Dixon has just over 360 currently on the payroll. This staff shortage exacerbates the danger of working in corrections.

What's more, the individual in custody (who's serving a 26-year sentence for attempted murder) should not have been housed at Dixon, a medium-security facility. After the assault, he was

immediately transferred to Pontiac Correctional Center, a maximum-security facility equipped to deal with high-risk individuals.

Woman receives prison time for threatening DCFS workers

A WOMAN FROM SPRINGFIELD has been sentenced to serve more than three years in prison for stalking and threatening two caseworkers for the Department of Children and

Family Services.

"DCFS employees work tirelessly to protect children in the state of Illinois," Assistant United States Attorney Sarah Seberger said. "The defendant's words caused real and severe emotional distress that these victims never should have had to endure for merely doing their jobs. This sentence sends a strong message that there are consequences for online threats of violence towards government employees."

Convicted of cyberstalking, 25-year-old Lerin Hughes is subject to three years of supervised release following her prison term.

The threats were made over a four-month stretch in summer 2022. Hughes made multiple threatening posts on social media threatening to kill a DCFS employee investigating child abuse. Prosecutors also presented evidence that Hughes said she wanted to shoot other juvenile court workers and Gov. J.B. Pritzker.

The judge in the case said she handed down this sentence as a deterrent to others from harassing child welfare employees.

DCFS employees are routinely put in dangerous situations, often in the field dealing with unpredictable

situations in unfamiliar territory. Two DCFS caseworkers, Deidre Silas and Pam Knight, were murdered on the job in recent years.

AFSCME Local 805 represents the DCFS workers who were targeted with the threats. Union president David Morris said he's grateful to the FBI for taking the threats seriously, and that the sentence sets a strong precedent.

"The message going out to people is, 'Stop messing with us,'" Morris said. "There will be consequences."

Economy at post-pandemic high point

ECONOMISTS NOW SAY THE worst of high inflation is in the rearview mirror, the unemployment rate is holding steady at 3.7%, stocks are setting new all-time highs and consumer sentiment is rising.

The good economic news comes on the heels of years of post-pandemic worry that the economy could backslide into a recession and cause widespread job losses. But those worries seem to be fading as the country arrives at the coveted "soft landing."

Inflation has declined from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022 to the present rate of 3.1%, while unemployment is nearing a 50-year low.

The recovery has been helped along by President Joe Biden's efforts to strengthen the economy and create jobs. The \$1.2 trillion bipartisan infrastructure investment package he championed is creating good union jobs nationwide, building and repairing roads, bridges, railways and more. The bill also funds projects that are bringing high-speed internet to rural communities.

In addition, the Inflation Reduction Act that Biden signed in 2022 raised revenue by increasing corporate taxes and enabling the Internal Revenue Service to audit the wealthy with more agents. Importantly for seniors, it capped out-of-pocket prescription drug costs for those on Medicare.



RETIREE NOTES

Supporting a Prescription Drug Affordability Board

TWENTY-EIGHT PERCENT OF people in Illinois have either rationed or not filled their prescriptions because of high costs. It's time for that to change.

That's why AFSCME Retirees Chapter 31 has joined the Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans, the AARP and other allies in the Prescription Drug Affordability Coalition led by Citizen Action/Illinois. The coalition's goal is to pass a bill in the state legislature to establish a Prescription Drug Affordability Board (PDAB).

While Medicare is now negotiating the payments for certain high-price brand-name prescription drugs—a significant step in the right direction—much work still needs to be done to address the exorbitant costs of so many medications. A PDAB can help to further rein in bad corporate actors who are gouging working people and retirees on prescription drug costs.

A PDAB is an independent body with the authority to evaluate high-cost drugs and set upper payment limits on what state of Illinois residents will pay, similar to existing state practices for utilities and insurance premiums. Upper payment limits apply to the entire supply chain, ensuring that lower costs benefit consumers.

Upper payment limits are not price controls. They set the maximum amount that anyone will pay for a given prescription drug, but do not affect list prices or the ability to offer price concessions per standard business practice. In fact, upper payment limits create greater access to costly drugs and improved ability to finance treatment with those drugs.

Don Todd is president of both the Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans and AFSCME Retiree Sub-chapter 86 in the Springfield area. At a State Capitol news conference on Jan. 18, he told a powerful story about Tom and Darlene, two former members of his sub-chapter who struggled to stay on top of mounting prescription drug costs towards the end of their lives.

"In 2018, Darlene was diagnosed with diabetes and other complications," Todd said. "When we'd lobby, she'd bring out of her purse a small package

SEASON OF GIVING: RETIREES GIVE BACK



Sub-chapter 85 was busy this holiday season, giving to the Humane Society, Sleep in Heavenly Peace, Sandoval Shalom, Home to School Program, Centralia Youth Center, Mission Centralia, and CCBA Food Pantry. David Ford, pictured here, presents a donation to the Salvation Army.



Members of Sub-chapter 55 donated to the Shawneetown Public Library, a public service near and dear to their chapter.



Sub-chapter 93 members Teri Ricci and Jaci Chapman present their year-end food donation to the Benton Ministerial Alliance.

of macaroni and cheese and say, 'This is what we can afford to eat, because we can't afford both medication and food.'

"Darlene died during COVID," he continued. "Tom died about a month later, I think from a broken heart. So this is why we're dedicated to getting a Prescription Drug Affordability Board. It affects older people like Darlene and Tom, but also young people, working people, who can't afford their medication."

Eight states have already passed such legislation. Retirees will play a big role in the effort to win it here in Illinois.

"It's an issue that we hear about frequently from our members, and we are ready to educate our lawmakers on how to solve this issue," said Clyde Wilson, the president of Retiree

Sub-chapter 163. "Drugs don't work if people can't afford them."

New Commissioner of Social Security Administration

AFTER A TWO-AND-A-HALF year wait, the Social Security Administration finally has a new commissioner. In December, former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley was confirmed by the Senate by a 50-11 vote.

"It's never been more important that we have strong permanent leadership at the Social Security Administration," AFSCME President Lee Saunders said. "The challenges are big, and

the stakes are high. As huge numbers of Baby Boomers continue to become Social Security-eligible in the coming years, we need someone who will protect and expand this program."

During his confirmation hearing, O'Malley said Social Security faces a customer service crisis. He promised to focus on employee morale and improving the agency's response time.

Need Home Heating Assistance?

WHEN THE TEMPERATURE drops, heating bills rise. But for Illinois seniors struggling to make their payments,

financial assistance is available. The annual enrollment period for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program runs through August 15, 2024, or until funding is exhausted. In addition, eligible water and sewer customers facing disconnection may also apply for the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program.

For more information about income eligibility and how to apply, visit the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity's website at DCEO.Illinois.Gov/CommunityServices or by calling the Illinois Families call center at 1-833-711-0374.





The biggest way we stay safe is by staying alert and watching each other's backs. We don't ever want to be fully dependent on a flagger or road signs to make sure people are being cautious. We need to keep our heads on a swivel.

What's something you wished more people knew about plowing snow?

I wish drivers would give us more space. They follow us really closely and try to pass us. There is so much we have to think about when we're behind the wheel. The strobe lights are flashing off the snowflakes and that can be blinding. I've got focus on the plow, the side wing, the material that's coming


out of the back end, other cars and hazards on the road—all in slippery, low-visibility conditions. We have to focus on all of that on top of being aware of the car that's trying to pass me. Then I have to think about the car that's coming towards me. That's a lot running through our heads when we're out there on the road.

Why did you get active in your AFSCME local?

I knew I was going to stay at this job for a long time. This was going to be my career, so I knew I had to be involved in some way, and when a position on the Local 473 executive board came open, I stepped up. Management could take advantage of us, so I try to use what I've learned to educate my guys so they know what their rights are.

How has your union made a difference?

My union specifically holds great value because without it we don't have a voice. I've had non-union jobs before where you really don't have a voice in anything unless you're connected or liked by upper management. Just having the union gives you a voice. We wouldn't have half the benefits we've got without our union.

Our union is a very rewarding thing to have, especially when you've got that camaraderie built up and you can stand together. There are so many paths available to us through the union that we can make a better and safer living—whether it's wages, benefits or through a safer working environment. 

Jason Ferro

SENIOR EQUIPMENT OPERATOR
WINNEBAGO COUNTY

AFSCME Local 473

What do you do as a senior equipment operator?

We do a number of different things from hot-mixing, road repair, patching potholes and blowups in the road, snow-plowing, seal-coating, and more. We're working a lot with heavy equipment, loaders and dump trucks, things of that sort.

The job is great. I like that I'm always out and about, not surrounded by four walls. They give us a job to do, and it's up to us to get it done. We're basically our own supervisors when we're out on a job. We have a lot of freedom to do our work the way we see fit. But there is also the freedom of being out in the elements, trying to get things done, making the roads safer for the public, that is very rewarding.

You do dangerous work. How do you and your coworkers stay safe on the job?

Safety is always the number one priority for us. Between training and the proper maintenance of the equipment we're using, those are the biggest aspects of safety.

Traffic is the biggest risk to us, mostly people who are on their cell phones. They get complacent in their daily driving and they don't notice the "Road Work Ahead" signs. They tend to come up in the work zone and they're not paying attention. Maybe they're distracted by kids in the car. All you have to do is be wrong one time and there could be serious consequences. There have been several times where I've had to faceplant by diving out of the way of a car or I was getting hit.