



Pay Day!

Illinois legislators among highest paid in nation

The Problem

Although facing a serious budget deficit, Illinois legislators remain among the best compensated in the nation. Today, Illinois state representatives and senators earn a base salary of \$67,836¹—the fifth-highest legislator salary in the country. Only California, Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania pay their legislators more.²

Illinois state representatives and senators earn around 47 percent more than the average Illinois resident, who earns \$46,110 a year according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.³ Occupations in Illinois receiving comparable compensation to legislators include microbiologists, physics professors, credit analysts and tax examiners.

It wasn't always this way. Up until 1897, Illinois legislators received no salary and were paid by the number of days in session, starting at 2 dollars per day for the first 42 days and dropping to 1 dollar each day after, along with 10 cents per mile for travel.⁴ In 1909, salaries increased to \$1,000 and have since gradually increased. Since 1967, legislative leaders have acquired additional compensation, and since 1989, so have committee chairmen and minority spokesmen.⁵

Out of all of the states that pay their senators and representatives a base annual salary, the average pay is \$33,983 (Illinois's base annual pay is 99 percent higher).⁶ Other states pay their legislators based on the days they spend in session. Legislators from Utah, Texas and New Mexico receive no salary.

Why such a high salary compared to other states? In 1984, the General Assembly created a 12-member Compensation Review Board responsible for suggesting pay for legislators, judges, executive officers and major appointed officers.⁷ Each legislative leader appointed three members of the Board, which proposed legislative salary changes subject to General Assembly approval. Unless both houses rejected its suggestions uniformly, the Board's recommendations took place.⁸ Therefore, both chambers could say they rejected a pay increase—by using

Graphic I
History of Legislator Salaries in Illinois

| Year | Salary | Year | Salary |
|---------------|----------|-------------------|----------|
| 1917 | \$1,750 | 1991 (July 1) | \$37,230 |
| 1939 | \$2,500 | 1992 (July 1) | \$38,496 |
| 1947 | \$3,000 | 1993 (July 1) | \$39,420 |
| 1953 | \$5,000 | 1994 (July 1) | \$40,445 |
| 1959 | \$6,000 | 1995 (January 11) | \$42,265 |
| 1965 | \$7,500 | 1995 (July 1) | \$45,669 |
| 1967 | \$9,000 | 1996 (July 1) | \$47,039 |
| 1969 | \$12,000 | 1997 (July 1) | \$48,403 |
| 1971 | \$17,500 | 1998 (July 1) | \$49,807 |
| 1975 | \$20,000 | 1999 (January 13) | \$50,803 |
| 1979 | \$25,000 | 1999 (July 1) | \$53,581 |
| 1980 | \$28,000 | 2000 (July 1) | \$55,778 |
| 1985 | \$30,250 | 2001 (July 1) | \$57,619 |
| 1985 (July 1) | \$32,500 | 2007 (July 1) | \$65,353 |
| 1987 | \$33,962 | 2008 (July 1) | \$67,836 |
| 1987 (July 1) | \$35,661 | 2010 (July 1) | \$67,836 |

Source: Illinois General Assembly Research Response: History of Legislators' Compensation and Expense Allowances.

This is part 8 of the Illinois Policy Institute's weekly Spotlight on Spending series, highlighting wasteful or inefficient programs and spending with the goal of bringing more responsible spending and accountable government to Illinois. For additional information on state spending, visit www.IllinoisOpenGov.org.

different language than the other house—and still receive a pay bump. Additionally, office allowances for legislators have been indexed for inflation since 2002.⁹

In 2009, Senate Bill 2090 abolished the Compensation Review Board and barred inflation adjustments in fiscal year 2009.¹⁰ However, automatic adjustments for inflation, which started in 1990, continue, subject to appropriation of amounts to fund the increases.¹¹

Does higher pay correlate with better performance from more experienced legislators? Not necessarily. A survey by the Illinois Policy Institute found that the 10 states with lowest legislator salaries had a budget deficit for fiscal year 2010 amounting to 19 percent of their general fund. In contrast, the 10 states with the highest legislator salaries had budget deficits for 2010 that amounted to 30 percent of their general fund.

Additionally, the top ten states with the highest compensation have varying session lengths. California has 8 or 9-month session, or “full-time legislature”; Michigan, 8-month, or “full-time”; New York, 6-month; Pennsylvania, 12-month, or “full-time”; Massachusetts, 11-month (for an odd year) or 8-month (for even year); Ohio, 12-month, or “full time”; Alaska, 3-month; Wisconsin, 10-month, or “full time”; and, New Jersey, 12-month, or “full time”.¹³ Other states with a 6-month session, like IL, include Rhode Island, which pays about \$18,000 and South Carolina, which pays about \$17,000.¹⁴

**Graphic 2
Legislator Compensation and Budget Shortfall Comparison**

| Top 10 in Compensation | | Salary | % Budget Shortfall (FY2010) |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|----------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | California | \$95,291 | 64.50% |
| 2 | Michigan | \$79,650 | 12.40% |
| 3 | New York | \$79,500 | 38.00% |
| 4 | Pennsylvania | \$78,314 | 23.30% |
| 5 | Illinois | \$67,836 | 40.90% |
| 6 | Massachusetts | \$61,440 | 17.70% |
| 7 | Ohio | \$60,584 | 14.00% |
| 8 | Alaska | \$50,400 | 30.70% |
| 9 | Wisconsin | \$49,943 | 23.80% |
| 10 | New Jersey | \$49,000 | 38.40% |
| Average % Budget Shortfall | | | 30.37% |
| Bottom 10 in Compensation | | | |
| 1 | Texas | \$0 | 18.00% |
| 2 | Utah | \$0 | 9.80% |
| 3 | New Mexico | \$0 | 22.20% |
| 4 | Mississippi | \$10,000 | 18.70% |
| 5 | South Carolina | \$10,400 | 20.00% |
| 6 | Nebraska | \$12,000 | 9.00% |
| 7 | North Carolina | \$13,951 | 26.20% |
| 8 | Rhode Island | \$14,019 | 33.00% |
| 9 | Arkansas | \$15,869 | 8.70% |
| 10 | Louisiana | \$16,800 | 21.60% |
| Average % Budget Shortfall | | | 18.72% |

Source: Salary determined by Illinois Policy Institute; % Budget Shortfall determined by Center on Budget and Policy Priorities¹²
*Note: States paying legislators on a per-day basis were excluded from this analysis.

Our Solution

Illinois should make salaries consistent with the average of legislator pay nationwide. Barring immediate cuts, pay should be frozen until the national average catches up with Illinois’s current pay level.

Fortunately, lawmakers decided against a legislator pay increase scheduled for July 2010. We hope this mentality continues in the years to follow—and to make a stronger point, lawmakers should eliminate inflation-based, automatic pay increases and require an “on the record” vote for all future pay increases as well.

Why This Works

The state pays legislators considerably more than the nationwide average, and Illinois’s perpetual budget deficit is a good indication that we’re necessarily not getting our money’s worth.

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Illinois needs to look at every item of spending in order to make sure it is using tax dollars as efficiently and fairly as possible, especially when taxpayers throughout the state are working hard to support their families and communities during tough economic times.

Endnotes

- 1 *Ibid.*
- 2 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Employment Statistics: May 2009 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates," <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oesrscst.htm>.
- 3 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Employment Statistics: May 2009 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates (Illinois)," http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_il.htm#00-0000.
- 4 Illinois General Assembly Research Response: History of Legislators' Compensation and Expense Allowances, May 21, 2010, <http://ilga.gov/commission/lru/Compensation2010.pdf>.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Average legislator salary was found by excluding states that paid per day, per week or did not pay salaries. Lump sum payments were averaged over the biennium as were salaries that differed over the two-year term.
- 7 Illinois General Assembly Research Response: History of Legislators' Compensation and Expense Allowances, May 21, 2010, <http://ilga.gov/commission/lru/Compensation2010.pdf>.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Recession Continues to Batter State Budgets; State Responses Could Slow Recovery," May 27, 2010, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=711>.
- 13 National Conference of State Legislatures, "Legislative Session Length," <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=17272>. Data for North Carolina found at <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/DocumentSites/bronseDocSite.asp?nID=2&FolderName=\House\2009>. Data for New York found at <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?sb=cal>. Data for Rhode Island found at <http://www.ncsl.org/?tabid=18630>.
- 14 Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics: May 2009 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oesrscst.htm>.