

ON THE

MOVE



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AFSCME Members Keep Illinois Moving

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ON THE MOVE

Illinois On the Move is published six times annually by Illinois Public Employees Council 31 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO. Send correspondence to: nmcnamara@afscme31.org or: AFSCME, On the Move, 205 N. Michigan Ave., 21st Floor, Chicago, IL 60601

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Out of the woods?

Not yet, but we're getting there



BY ROBERTA LYNCH

OUR PENSIONS ARE STILL AT RISK

Let's face it: Budgets are boring. Ok, not to everyone. But to an awful lot of us. Our eyes tend to glaze over when we start reading through pages of numbers with only very occasional narrative tidbits.

But the simple reality is that the State of Illinois budget is essential to the wellbeing of just about every AFSCME member in our state. It funds all the services that AFSCME members in state government provide (and all of their wages and benefits). And it contributes significant operational funding to state universities, local units of government, and nonprofit agencies where many members work.

It was a good deal of budget chicanery over the course of many years—compounded by outright weaponization of the budget during the Rauner years—that left our state mired in debt, with the biggest debt of all being the one owed to future public sector retirees in state pension systems—SERS, SURS and TRS.

Because too few elected officials were willing to speak the truth about the revenues needed to keep state government operational and prepared to meet its obligations to retirees, year after year the so-called “balanced” budget relied on gross underfunding of our pensions. And too often those smoke-and-mirror strategies were complemented by cutbacks in state services—including the closures of nearly a dozen prisons, psychiatric hospitals and developmental centers—and large-scale layoffs of state employees.

AFSCME fought back against every closure and managed to block layoffs or secure strong recall rights that brought most employees back into the state workforce. But fixing the pension problem has been a much tougher challenge.

When anti-pension forces launched a full-fledged attack and succeeded in persuading legislators of both parties that the only solution was to cut public employee pension benefits, AFSCME joined with other unions to fight all the way to the

Illinois Supreme Court. And we won that round! In a landmark ruling, the court found that pensions are a constitutionally protected commitment that cannot be diminished.

But the pension problem remained because the underfunding remained, and pension debt grew. We have a right to a pension, but what will happen if there is no money left in the pension funds in 10 or 20 years to cover our benefits?

Our opponents have an answer: Get rid of the constitutional provision that protects our pensions, making it possible for legislators to cut our benefits at will.

Even as I write, they are pressing forward on that front. Sen. Darren Bailey, who is campaigning to be our next governor, has introduced legislation that would put a referendum on the ballot this November to repeal the pension protection clause of the state constitution.

Governor Pritzker is taking a different path. While providing temporary freezes of gas, sales, and property taxes this year, his budget plan not only makes the required pension contributions but also includes an additional payment of \$500 million.

This payment will bring greater stability to the pension funds, while at the same time saving taxpayers an estimated \$1.8 billion over the next two decades by reducing interest payments on the outstanding debt.

Seems like a win-win, right? Not in the eyes of some legislators in both parties. Republicans are arguing that rather than seeking to stabilize the pension funds, there should be more tax cuts, while Democrats want more human service spending.

This budget plan does not include any facility closures or layoffs of state employees. And that's great news! But there is still room for improvement from

the General Assembly: There is no increased funding to address understaffing woes in IDHS and IDOC facilities; there is very little additional funding for state universities where employee salaries lag well behind state government wages for comparable work; and there is not sufficient funding to raise the very low wages of direct care workers in state agencies.

We're going to be working to convince legislators to address these deficiencies.

What we're not going to be doing, however, is supporting elimination of the “extra” payment that can help bring a measure of stability to our state's troubled pension systems.

Over the last few years, the Pritzker Administration has steadily whittled down the mountain of debt that Bruce Rauner left behind. Now state employees no longer need to cope with disgruntled doctors who threaten to discontinue care because the state health plan had a years' long bill backlog. Nor is the state any longer paying the exorbitant interest on debt that the law requires in matters of delinquency.

And, perhaps most important, now there is at least a shot that the credit agencies will upgrade Illinois' credit rating, lowering the interest rates that the state will have to pay on borrowing.

Would we have been better off if the referendum to revamp Illinois' unfair tax structure had passed in 2020? No doubt about it. There would be more revenues available to our state now. But anti-pension forces like the Illinois Policy Institute went all out to defeat the referendum to abet their quest to cut our benefits by keeping state revenues down.

For now, the governor has outwitted them—producing a responsible budget plan that bodes well for our state's stability and growth. Without additional revenues it would be hard to do much more. That's why AFSCME remains committed to renewing our quest for a more equitable and adequate state revenue plan.

Boring? Maybe. But the best way forward to address many of the myriad problems that so many AFSCME members confront every day.

On the Cover:
AFSCME members are on the job this winter, through sleet, snow and bitter cold—including these hardworking Local 699 members at the city of Bloomington. Photo by David Proeber, The Pantagraph.

Honoring the life of hero Deidre Silas

Making safety a priority



DCFS investigator Deidre Silas, a member of AFSCME Local 805, was murdered on Jan. 4 while responding to a report of children in danger. Sangamon County sheriff's deputies who reported to the scene found Silas brutally stabbed to death.

Silas was visiting a residence in Thayer, about 20 miles south of Springfield, to investigate the well-being of six children in the house, ages one to seven years old. But instead of a conversation, the other side of the door held a tragic fate.

Later that day police arrested Benjamin Reed, an individual who lived at the house and had fled the scene. Two days later, dozens of DCFS employees attended Reed's arraignment to demand justice for Deidre. Reed was charged with first-degree murder and aggravated battery with a deadly weapon and is being held without bail.

Deidre's coworkers and fellow AFSCME members joined the whole state in mourning her death.

"We are devastated," said Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch, who spoke at Silas's funeral. "The hearts and thoughts of every AFSCME member are with Deidre's loved ones, especially her children, in the wake of their profound and senseless loss."

"In Deidre, we saw an extraordinary woman who

dedicated her too-short life to saving the lives of children. In her name we rededicate ourselves to our vigilant advocacy to protect the vulnerable and improve workplace safety for all."

Gov. JB Pritzker ordered that U.S. and Illinois flags be set at half-staff in Deidre's honor, beginning at sunrise Jan. 20 and ending at sunset on Jan. 23.

"Today, the State of Illinois mourns the loss of Deidre Silas, a DCFS caseworker and a hero, taken from us in the line of duty. There is no higher calling than the work to keep children and families safe and Deidre lived that value every single day," Pritzker said. "Our most vulnerable are safer because she chose to serve. I can think of no more profound legacy."

Compassionate career

Deidre dedicated her career to helping young people and protecting children. She graduated college in 2008 with a Bachelor of Science degree in criminal justice, and earned

her master's degree in public administration in 2019. Prior to joining DCFS in August 2021 she worked in behavioral health and for more than seven years with the Department of Juvenile Justice at IYC-St. Charles where she served as treasurer of AFSCME Local 416.

"From the first time you meet Deidre, you know she's a genuine, good-hearted woman," said Angela Kuter, a former coworker of Silas's. "When she smiled, her whole face lit up. At IYC-St. Charles, she earned the respect of the staff and the kids. As a union steward, she made sure staff were well-informed and their rights weren't being violated. Her calling in life was helping people, standing up and fighting for people. She was a public servant at heart."

"This line of work requires you to meet people on some of their worst days," Deidre's supervisor and Local 805 member Jamie Bramblett said. "Deidre had a great balance. She was compassionate and authoritative, yet without being condescending. She got kids to talk to her without making them worried. She got parents to listen to her without being offended. She had amazing investigative skills and helped find children who needed help. She never

Contributions for Deidre Silas's children can be sent to:

Ashton & Amelia Silas Scholarship Fund
C/O United Community Bank
120 South Chatham Road
Springfield, IL 62704

child, and I think that's what Deidre was doing."

Rallying together

AFSCME members have rallied together to support each other in the wake of the tragedy.

Because Deidre left behind two small children ages two and five, AFSCME Local 805 President David Morris worked closely with her family to set up a scholarship fund in their name. Deidre's union siblings at IYC-St. Charles took up a collection for the fund and wore wristbands in her honor.

AFSCME has long made it a priority to fight for safer working conditions for public service workers. After DCFS investigator Pamela Knight was murdered four years ago when she had gone to a home to rescue a child, AFSCME launched an intensive effort to improve safety for DCFS employees. While progress was made in some areas, the department

Lynch said. "One death in the line of service is too many. To honor the memories of Deidre and Pam, AFSCME is redoubling our efforts to press for these safety measures so that no more lives are lost on the front lines of child protection."

The AFSCME DCFS Standing Committee is urging the department to establish additional safety measures, including adequate staffing and better management of caseloads; expanded training and tools to keep workers safer in the field; improved threat assessment, and increased collaboration with law enforcement. AFSCME is also backing the Knight-Silas Bill (SB 3070) in the General Assembly, which will stiffen penalties for attacks on DCFS employees.

"Our AFSCME family is standing together to fight for justice for Deidre and to carry on her mission of being a voice for the voiceless and standing



Deidre Silas' coworkers turned out in Springfield on Jan. 6 for the arraignment of the man charged with her murder.


accepted less than great work out of herself."

Deidre felt compelled to protect children, her mother said. "It's a challenging job, but if you're thinking about the kids ... if you're called to do it ... whatever way you can, you just want to help somebody's

failed to act on some of the union's key proposals.

"This tragedy is a stark reminder that frontline DCFS employees like Deidre do demanding, dangerous and essential jobs every day, often despite inadequate resources and tremendous stress,"

up for the most vulnerable among us," Local 805 President David Morris said.

"When you find someone like Deidre you want to hold on to them as long as you possibly can," Bramblett said. "Losing her is a huge loss for this office and for DCFS as a whole." 

IDOC—our safety matters!

AFSCME members push back against management's misplaced priorities



For six months the Illinois Department of Corrections has made its top priority compelling all employees to be vaccinated against COVID. While the courts have upheld the right of employers to issue such mandates, AFSCME challenged the rigid requirements the state put in place for congregate facilities.

AFSCME presented a more effective and responsible “vaccinate or test” alternative, that could have ensured that within a month’s time all employees would either be vaccinated or tested regularly and argued that persons in custody and visitors to the prisons should be subject to the same standards as staff.

Instead of agreeing to these commonsense protective measures, the state insisted on a rigid “vaccination only” mandate for employees of all congregate settings.

After months of battling at the bargaining table, AFSCME invoked the right of security employees in IDOC and IDJJ to interest arbitration and took the fight for a fairer and more effective COVID prevention program before an independent arbitrator.

“Unfortunately, the arbitrator ended up affirming the employer’s vaccination mandate without allowing for a testing alternative,” said Council 31 Regional Director

Ed Caumiant, “although he did uphold the union’s position that visitors must also be vaccinated.”

Standing for fairness

In the wake of the arbitrator’s order, AFSCME sought to build on the months of negotiations that had already secured expansion of employee rights in IDHS and IDVA. An agreement was reached that provided that employees would not be terminated for refusal to vaccinate but would be subject to progressive discipline concluding with the ability to choose a leave of absence or modified layoff for up to one year. Employees who contracted COVID on the job would have access to unlimited paid time off without using any of their own benefit time. And all vaccinated or exempt employees would have 15 paid days off if a child or other family member was under quarantine due to COVID.

IDOC’s rigid position on employee vaccinations led to months of conflict and effectively papered over the many departmental practices that were actually placing employees in greater jeopardy—the lack of effective quarantining, the movement of inmates within and among prisons allowing for ready transmission of the virus, the inadequacy of departmental COVID testing practices, and a crisis in commissary operations.

Commissary crisis

Ironically, while IDOC was very publicly initiating its mandatory vaccination policy

a necessary benefit for a diverse array of interests and needs and a relief from bad prison meals. For staff, the employee commissary provides the opportunity to purchase healthier meal choices than those available inside the prison walls.

But recently, claiming that an internal audit finding “required” the department to move to a single source, IDOC designated a statewide contractor to provide products for all the commissaries. The change has had extremely problematic consequences.


“The new statewide contractor, Keefe, was chosen not based on capacity or performance, but simply on its

Keefe as the primary contractor. In addition, the department agreed to allow facilities to order from five “emergency” contractors to try to get more and better supplies flowing.

The changes have not helped much. Orders are still coming back only 10% fulfilled with no means to rectify the shortages. As a result, utilization of commissaries is at historic lows, compromising a critical element in maintaining morale and order—and thus safety—in the correctional system.

Looking ahead

Since the department has been so slow to fix the commissary problem, AFSCME is expanding outreach efforts. Local union leaders are reaching out to the small businesses that used to provide goods to their facilities. Council 31 lobbyists are working in Springfield with advocacy groups who recognize the importance of commissaries for inmate morale. And AFSCME members have begun to contact their legislators to make sure they know the importance of a robust, locally-based vendor system for prison commissaries.

“There are so many vectors in the Department of Corrections that put employees’ safety in jeopardy, whereas AFSCME is determined to make staff safety a true priority,” Caumiant said. 

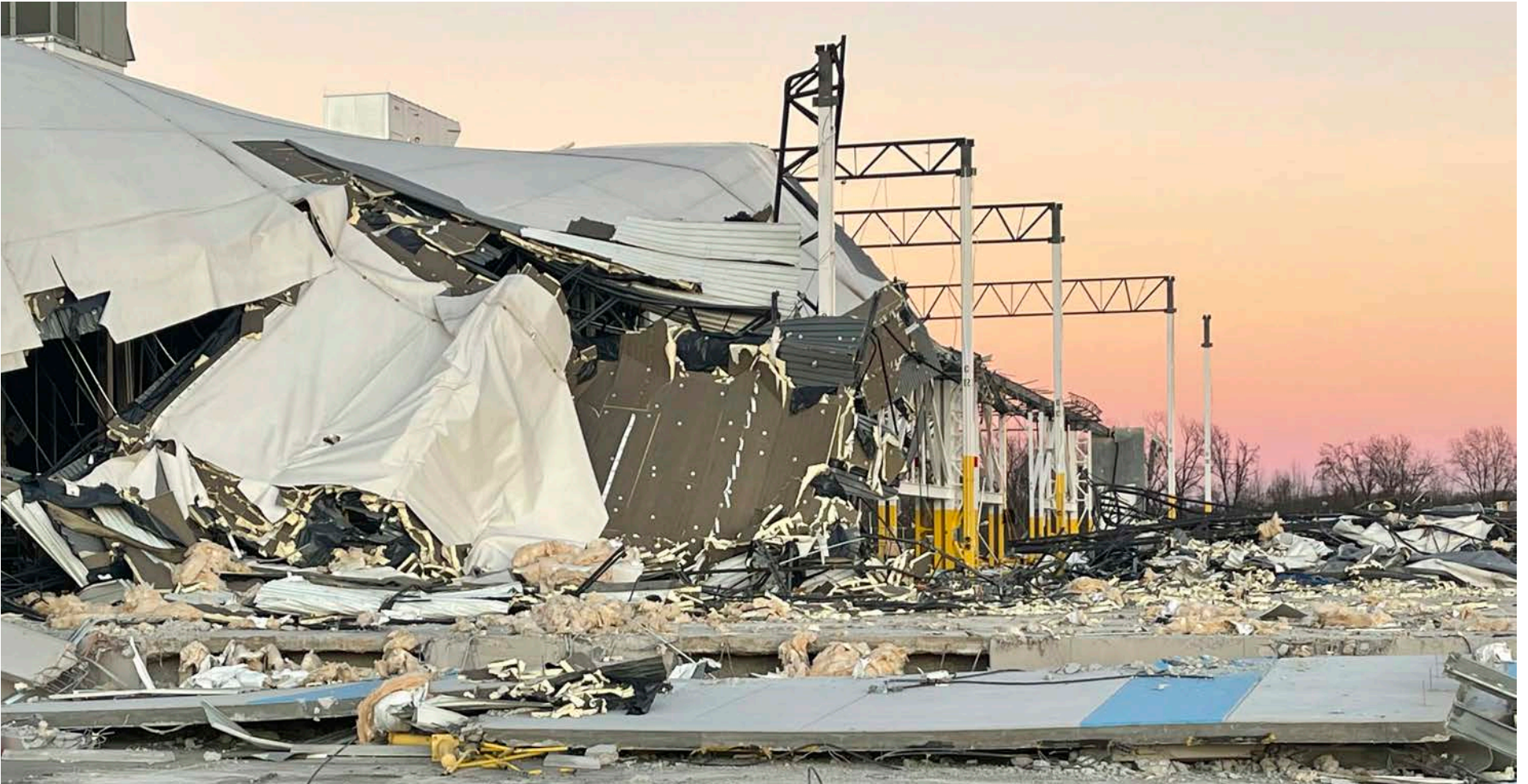
“AFSCME is determined to make staff safety a true priority.”

last August in the name of safe conditions, the department very quietly changed its longstanding procurement procedures in a manner that drastically altered the operations of commissaries in the state prison system and greatly increased frustrations among both employees and persons in custody.

The commissary has always been a critical element in maintaining morale and order—and thus safety—in the correctional system. For persons in custody, it’s both

low bid and it turned out to be completely unfit for the task,” Caumiant said. “Within a few months we were hearing reports of shortages and woefully inadequate product.”

What’s more, by making this change IDOC effectively cut off a wide array of small businesses in small towns all across Illinois who had very efficiently provided an array of products for prison commissaries for decades. AFSCME joined local businesses and prisoner advocates in decrying the new system and was able to remove



"It was a massive search and rescue effort for 48 hours straight." AFSCME members helped find survivors and clear debris after a tornado blasts through Illinois and four other states.

Union members step up after tornado kills six in Illinois

Massive storms rip Midwest, prompting emergency response effort

More than 90 lives were lost when a massive tornado swept through the Midwest on the night of December 10. The victims, ranging in age from two months to 98 years, were from Illinois, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee and Missouri.

The six people killed in Illinois were all working in an Edwardsville Amazon warehouse when approximately 150 yards of the giant structure collapsed.

AFSCME Local 799 members Mary Kate Brown and Matt Bogard of the Madison County Emergency Management Agency were called to the scene to help manage logistics for the rescue effort.

"It was a massive search and rescue effort for 48 hours straight," Deputy Director of Preparedness Brown said. "We may not be suiting up and digging through the rubble, but we're right there providing support to the people that are: getting equipment, gathering agencies on site, bringing in lights for the night of searching, providing food and making sure people had a place to shelter from the 30-degree weather."

The EMA also established a command post that acted as a hub for the fire and police chiefs to develop incident action plans for the first

several hours of the disaster, and the days following. They helped provide special equipment like light towers and a drone used to search for people and debris.

"This is the biggest disaster I've witnessed in the area," Logistics Coordinator Bogard said. "I was in the Marines for eight years and saw similar destruction when I was deployed, but you don't expect to see it in your hometown."

Elsewhere the storm ripped through a candle factory, destroyed a nursing home, derailed a train, and caused untold damage to homes and businesses. Gov. J.B. Pritzker issued a disaster proclamation for nearly 30 counties across central and

southern Illinois after the weekend's damage was fully realized.

In Edwardsville, fatalities only occurred at the Amazon warehouse where a tornado formed in the parking lot. "It was amazing to see how huge and thick and tall and heavy these walls were," Bogard said. "From the time the tornado hit to the time the walls fell was so fast, that's how powerful tornadoes are."

Most of the workers were able to get to a storm shelter, but of the seven who sheltered

preparedness training. And it was challenging to account for who was missing at the facility because many of the warehouse workers were temporary.

OSHA inspectors who arrived the day after the devastation have six months to complete an investigation into whether Amazon followed workplace safety rules.

Catastrophes like this highlight the need for collective bargaining to establish clear and effective safety protocols.

"This is another outrageous example of the company putting profits over the health and safety of their workers," said Stuart Appelbaum, the president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. "We cannot stand for this."

United union effort

Every Illinois county has its own Emergency Management Agency. In addition to responding to disasters, AFSCME members in those offices have been integral to the ongoing fight against COVID-19.


When the pandemic started, they organized the distribution of masks, gloves and other protective gear to distribute to the health care providers in the area. Now they provide ongoing support to the health department and run logistics

for mass vaccination clinics and testing sites.

That kind of support is critical when crises like the Dec. 10 tornado rock a community. The EMA acts as a coordinating entity among all the agencies and organizations that must work together to get the job done.

"The outpouring of support from emergency services and the community was overwhelming," Bogard said. "Most, if not all, the workers on site were union and they did a great job: fire, EMS, police, coroner's office, EMA. We're all skilled and trained to a certain standard so we can work in unison together. It was an honor to work with the people who were out there."

"Especially nowadays with all that's going on in the world, it's inspiring when everybody can come together for a common purpose for the community and help people as best as we can," Brown said. "Anybody who goes into public service does it because they want to help people and that's what we did."

"It's something I'm going to remember for a long, long time," Bogard reflected. "It reminds you how short life is; nothing is certain. So hug your kids a little tighter and appreciate life a little more. Take time off work and spend it with your family when you can." 

"Anybody who goes into public service does it because they want to help people and that's what we did."

OSHA investigates

Only seven of the 190 people who worked at the facility were full-time Amazon employees, raising concerns about the safety of businesses primarily run with contracted workers. Seasonal surges in employees and high turnover make it hard for employers to conduct regular emergency

in place in another part of the building, all but one were killed.

AFSCME advocates for safety, fairness in legislative session

The Illinois General Assembly is planning on a much shorter—and therefore more limited—legislative session than in pre-pandemic times. Legislative leaders have said they expect to focus primarily on the budget and to wrap up the session by early April.

Where a normal legislative session might see thousands of bills make at least some movement through the legislative bodies, this year the numbers are likely to only be in the hundreds. Nonetheless, AFSCME is pushing for legislative action on several fronts—based on the conviction that even if we can't move every bill through both chambers, we can educate and build support among a broad range of legislators. And as always, the union will fight any bills that pose a threat to workers' rights.

SUPPORT

• **HB 1167**
COVID TIME FOR SCHOOL EMPLOYEES
(Rep. Yang Rohr)

Provides paid time off to public school district and state higher education employees for COVID-related absences, including quarantine and illness of the employee or their children. The original bill for this benefit was reworked so that it only applies to employees who have received vaccination against the deadly virus.

• **HB 4385/SB 3070**
AGGRAVATED BATTERY OF DCFS EMPLOYEES
(Rep. Greenwood/Sen. Turner)

Amends the Criminal Code of 2012. Provides that a person also commits aggravated battery—with the penalty a Class 1 felony—when they knowingly cause great bodily harm or permanent disability or disfigurement to a known Department of Children and Family Services employee.

• **HB 4566/SB 3679**
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE FOR NON-INSTRUCTIONAL EMPLOYEES
(Rep. Vella/Sen. Holmes)

Amends the Unemployment Insurance Act to provide for access to unemployment benefits when non-instructional school district or university employees are laid off without pay over the summer months.

• **HB 4616/SB 3607**
RAISING WAGES FOR DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS
(Rep. Evans/Sen. Villanueva)

Requires the Illinois Department of Human Services to establish reimbursement rates that build toward livable wages for front-line personnel in programs and agencies serving people with

Employee Benefits Act to ensure that caseworkers employed by the Department of Children and Family Services who die in the line of duty are covered by the provisions of the Act, including providing health insurance coverage for their surviving family members, and that the change is applied retroactively to one year before the effective date of the amended law.

• **HB 5258**
DEATH IN THE LINE OF DUTY BENEFITS – STATE EMPLOYEES
(Rep. Willis)

Amends the State Employees Group Insurance Act of 1971 to ensure that surviving family members of state employees

following: (1) any badge previously issued to the individual; or (2) if the individual has a currently valid Firearm Owner's Identification Card, the service firearm issued or previously issued to the individual.

• **HB 4960/SB 3773**
LABOR RELATIONS-UNIT STATUS
(Rep. Collins/Sen. Aquino)

Amends the Illinois Public Labor Relations Act so that no employee positions are wrongfully excluded from a bargaining unit for collective bargaining purposes. Provisions include: no public employee position shall be excluded from a bargaining unit prior to that position being filled; the Illinois Labor

Relations Board shall describe positions in terms of their job functions rather than titles; bargaining units shall include positions later filled that perform the job functions of existing positions in the unit or are logically encompassed within an existing unit.

• **HB 4331**
CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS-FIREARMS
(Rep. Bennett)


Amends the Illinois Police Training Act to permit retired law enforcement officers qualified under federal law to carry a concealed weapon. Amends the Criminal Code of 2012, the Unified Code of Corrections, and the County Jail Act. Permits currently employed and qualified retired state correctional officers and county correctional officers to carry their own firearms off-duty without being in violation of unlawful use of weapon statutes, if they meet certain training requirements.

• **HB 4360**
NURSING HOMES-REVENUE SPENDING
(Rep. Collins)

Amends the Nursing Home Care Act so that a long-term care facility must spend at least 85% of its total operating revenue on the direct care of its residents.

OPPOSE

• **SC10**
REPEAL CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION FOR PUBLIC PENSION BENEFITS
(Sen. Bailey)

Proposes to amend the General Provisions Article of the Illinois Constitution, removing language that protects the earned pension benefits of public employees in any pension or retirement system. The constitution currently states that membership in the pension plans of the state of Illinois, or any unit of local government, school district, agency or instrumentality thereof shall be considered an enforceable contractual relationship, the "benefits of which shall not be diminished or impaired." This amendment would provide unlimited power to the General Assembly to reduce or change pension benefits or other benefits of membership in any public pension or public retirement system, regardless of whether and when those benefits have accrued, been earned, or were established. 



AFSCME Local 3417 public works members clear the snowy streets of Springfield during a massive blizzard in February.

intellectual and developmental disabilities, including a minimum \$3.50 increase for front-line personnel as of July 1, 2022.

• **HB 4646/SB 3690**
IMRF-EMPLOYEE TRUSTEES
(Rep. Yang Rohr/Sen. Martwick)

Amends the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund (IMRF) Article of the Illinois Pension Code so that employees who elected to the IMRF Board of Trustees receive at least 20 days of paid leave of absence per year for trustee duties.

• **SB 3197**
DEATH IN THE LINE OF DUTY BENEFITS – DCFS EMPLOYEES
(Sen. Turner)

Amends the Public Safety

who die in the line of duty are provided with health insurance coverage. If passed into law, the change would impact the surviving family members of state employees who died in the line of duty after January 1, 2022.

• **SB 3631/HB 5045**
RETENTION OF BADGE/FIREARM
(Sen. Turner, D/Rep. Yednock)

Amends the Department of Revenue Law of the Civil Administrative Code of Illinois, Counties Code, Illinois Gambling Act, Unified Code of Corrections, and Probation and Probation Officers Act. Allows specified officers, investigators, agents, and employees who are retiring in good standing to purchase either or both of the

• **SB 3952/HB 4919**
UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICE PROCEDURE
(Sen. Bush/Rep. Willis)

Amends the Illinois Public Labor Relations Act so that if the Illinois Labor Relations Board finds that there has been an unfair labor practice violation by an employer who refuses to bargain collectively in good faith with the union, then the parties shall

Union wins at Art Institute of Chicago museum, school

More than 500 employees join AFSCME's ranks



Art Institute of Chicago employee Jena Carvana celebrates voting yes for her union.

Staff at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) voted overwhelmingly to form their union with AFSCME Council 31 in mail-ballot elections tallied January 11 and 12.

The two groups have joined together as AICWU—the Art Institute of Chicago Workers United.

The historic result makes AICWU the first union at a major museum in the city. More than 500 employees will be part of the new union, including everyone from custodians to curators, library workers to gift shop employees, student advisors to receptionists, and more.

When all the ballots were counted, nearly 80% in each unit said, “Union Yes!”

“Winning our union means a voice in our workplace and a chance to improve working conditions for ourselves, our colleagues, and those who will follow us for generations to come,” museum archivist and AICWU activist Anna Feuer said.

“My colleagues and I are building a new foundation at SAIC, one based on transparency, equity and better working conditions,” said AICWU activist Myia Brown, assistant director of career and professional experience at the school.

All eyes on Chicago

It was a high-profile campaign, with national media coverage from the Washington Post, NPR, In These Times and others joining frequent stories in Chicago newspapers, radio and TV.

AICWU also drew thousands of followers to its creative and entertaining social media platforms, where other unions such as the Screen Actors Guild and Starbucks Workers United and celebrities like Tom Morello and Sherman Dilla Thomas the TikTok historian showed their support.

“SAIC and Art Institute employees coming together in their union is inspiring,” AFSCME Council 31 Executive Director Roberta Lynch said. “I know they will use their voice to make the museum and the school better places to work, visit and learn.”

Employees had to overcome anti-union resistance from senior leadership of both the school and the museum, which refused to voluntarily

recognize AICWU, forced an election, campaigned for workers to vote no and challenged the right of dozens of employees to be included.

But those union-busting tactics were no match for the positive vision that activists presented to their coworkers of a better and more inclusive future through AICWU.

Standing united

Mike Zapata, an SAIC academic advisor, said that “Workers at SAIC are fighting for better

pay, more stability, equity and a voice in our futures.”

“This is a watershed moment,” said Erica Warren, former assistant curator at the museum. “AICWU will make the museum field more accessible and equitable, paving the way for future generations of workers in the arts.”

AFSCME represents some 10,000 museum workers at 91 cultural institutions nationwide and more than 25,000 library workers at 275 public and private libraries (see inset), including the Library of

Congress, the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the Milwaukee Public Museum and many more.

Now the newly minted AICWU members are busy doing all the things necessary to get ready to bargain their first contract: sending out bargaining surveys, holding informational sessions with their coworkers and electing their bargaining committees.



CULTURAL WORKERS UNITED

Art Institute employees join thousands more cultural workers in AFSCME Council 31. They include:

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Through immersive displays, shows and artifacts, this institution connects visitors to the life and times of perhaps the greatest American president, who long called Springfield home.

Chicago Cultural Center Part of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, AFSCME members at the Cultural Center help present free music, dance, theater, films, lectures, art exhibitions and family events at one of the city’s most visited attractions.

Illinois State Museum Headquartered in Springfield with branches near Lewiston and Lockport, the ISM presents exhibitions that explore our state’s past and present,

conducts research and maintains collections of artifacts reflecting Illinois’s heritage and history. When former governor Bruce Rauner tried to shut it down, AFSCME members led the fight to block the closure.

Libraries In addition to more than 3,000 library employees in Chicago, Aurora, Belleville, Berwyn, Evanston, Rockford and elsewhere who’ve long been represented by AFSCME, library workers in Homewood, Niles, Oak Lawn and St. Charles have recently joined our union!

Zoos AFSCME members include employees at the Miller Park Zoo in Bloomington, the Henson Robinson Zoo in Springfield and the Niabi Zoo in the Quad Cities.

Know anyone who works at a museum, library or other cultural organization who wants to form a union of their own? Email organize@afscme31.org



WORKERS' RIGHTS

This fall Illinois voters will have the opportunity to vote yes for the Workers' Rights Amendment. It's an important step to add protection to the state Constitution that will make it much harder for current or future politicians to limit your voice on the job, weaken your union or take away your right to collective bargaining.



As a nurse, my coworkers and I have been on the front lines all through the pandemic.

"I support the Workers' Rights Amendment because with our union we can bargain for the pay we deserve, the practices that keep us safe and the equipment we need to keep doing our jobs."

JOLEEN DIEHL
REGISTERED NURSE
ROCK ISLAND
LOCAL 2025



The work we do is dangerous. Through our union we have a strong voice to improve workplace safety.

"Passing the Workers' Rights Amendment will help ensure that we can keep speaking up about safety concerns."

ARNOLD BLACK
DCFS SUPERVISOR
URBANA
LOCAL 2971



As retirees we work for what we have today. Health insurance a

"I'm voting yes for the Workers' Rights to make sure the work we've worked for isn't taken away from us, the politicians, and our children and grandkids can have the same rights, too."

FLOYD CLAP
RETIREE
ROBINSON
SUB-CHAPTER 9

THIS YEAR'S ELECTION: LOOKING AHEAD

- **WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT IN NOVEMBER.** In addition to the Workers' Rights Amendment, Illinois voters will elect a US Senator, all Members of Congress, all statewide offices including Governor, members of the Illinois House and Senate, county offices including county boards, and the Illinois Supreme Court.
- **A LATER PRIMARY.** The primary election calendar is a little different this year. Primary election day will be June 28, with early voting starting May 23. It used to be in the early spring.
- **FOCUS ON STATE SUPREME COURT.** Control of the Illinois Supreme Court will be decided by two races in the suburban Chicago area. It's critically important to elect friends of working people to these seats; after all, it was the state Supreme Court that blocked politicians from cutting our pensions. Big corporate interests and anti-worker front groups will no doubt join forces to try to take over the Supreme Court.
- **GENERAL ELECTION A HOLIDAY.** In the fall, early voting starts Sept. 28. The general election is set for Tuesday, November 8. For the first time, Election Day is a state holiday.

S ON THE BALLOT

With the Workers' Rights Amendment in place, politicians couldn't simply change the law to take away wages, benefits, workplace safety protections or other provisions of your union contract—the state Constitution would stand in their way.



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Our union contract ensures everyone is paid fairly for the job they do. Without a union, you never know if an employer is paying you less because you're a woman or because of the color of your skin.

“We need the Workers' Rights Amendment for fairness and pay equity now and in the future.”

YURVETTE SIMMONS
DIRECT SUPPORT
PROFESSIONAL
JOLIET
LOCAL 3237



“

I'm voting yes for the Workers' Rights Amendment because it gives us the power to speak up for ourselves.

“Too many politicians of both parties have tried to take away our rights and benefits. Voting yes for the Workers' Rights Amendment means voting yes for my rights and my coworkers.”

TIM WORKER
CORRECTIONAL LIEUTENANT
VANDALIA
LOCAL 993

WORKERS'
RIGHTS 
AMENDMENT

Section 25. Workers' Rights

(a) Employees shall have the fundamental right to organize and to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing for the purpose of negotiating wages, hours, and working conditions, and to protect their economic welfare and safety at work. No law shall be passed that interferes with, negates, or diminishes the right of employees to organize and bargain collectively over their wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment and work place safety, including any law or ordinance that prohibits the execution or application of agreements between employers and labor organizations that represent employees requiring membership in an organization as a condition of employment.

**YOUR RIGHT TO
YOUR UNION!**

**POLITICIANS COULDN'T
TAKE AWAY YOUR RIGHTS!**

Yes No

LEARN MORE: WORKERSRIGHTS.COM

Winning back \$148,000 in unpaid wages

AFSCME members at Loretto Hospital uncover system payroll error

In February 2021, AFSCME Local 1216 members at Loretto Hospital in Chicago reached a contract settlement that dramatically restructures the way the hospital works, winning wage increases and creating a 20-step salary progression to reward longevity.

At a meeting two months after the ratification, the local was educating members about how to successfully enforce the gains made in the new contract. An emergency room nurse shared her frustration about consistently finding that her paychecks did not correctly represent the overtime she worked. Whenever she pointed out an error, Human Resources would eventually pay her what she was shorted, but then it would happen all over again.

Then local president Dee Sutton began hearing from other nurses that their paychecks weren't right, either.

"So many people were coming with the same complaints: their checks were short on overtime pay or short on differential pay," Sutton said. "We knew it couldn't be a coincidence and that we needed to look into this further."

Sutton and AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Rick

Surber requested a labor-management meeting where they proposed that the hospital audit the pay of all current and former employees for the past three years to see if there was a structural problem in the pay system.

The audit was concluded in October. The results were dramatic: More than 100 nurses had been underpaid to the tune of \$148,000. Back pay returned to individual employees ranged from a few dollars to more than \$10,000.

"That's a lot of money to keep from hard-working people," Sutton said. "They should have rectified it sooner. This is why being union is important. If we didn't have a union, I don't know if we would have discovered the extent of the problem or gotten that money back."


Sutton, along with her fellow union officers Vice President Mafa Jean Louis and



Members of AFSCME Local 1216 at Loretto Hospital gather donations for a food drive.

Secretary-Treasurer Sandra Weeks and bargaining team members worked together to make sure everyone got what was owed to them.

"We're always trying to get equality and fairness for our members," Sutton said. "That's the point of the union. Sometimes it's easy to get caught up

in only yourself. But in a union you're not alone in your fight; we're fighting together. United we stand, and united we succeed." 

Union saves member's career

Ashley Baney has been an animal caretaker with Rock Island County's animal care and control department for more than 15 years. She loves working with the animals, and as a single mom to two young boys, the union job helps her provide security for her family.

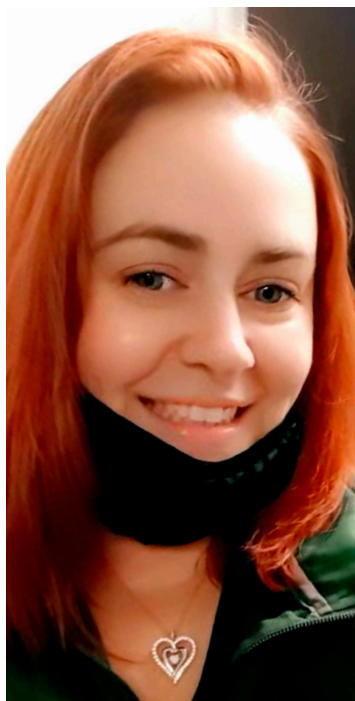
But last summer she almost lost it all because of one emotional conversation.

Baney was struggling to cover child care for her sons, cobbling together summer school in another town with help from her mom. But on June 14, her day off, as Baney was running late to get the boys to school, she and her mom got into an argument. Her mother said she would

no longer help care for her grandsons.

Distraught and panicking, Baney called her supervisor who she had known since she was 18. "I was in tears and told her I might have to quit my job unless I could find another situation for my kids," Baney recalled. "I was just venting on a hard day."

But after she hung up, Baney received a text message



Local 2025 member Ashley Baney at work after reversing wrongful termination.

from the supervisor saying her resignation was accepted. Confused, Baney headed into work to talk to the supervisor face-to-face to clear up the situation: She was not quitting her job.

But the supervisor refused to meet with her. She was

terminated. "I felt like she just decided to get rid of me and it wasn't fair," Baney said. She reached out to AFSCME Local 2025 which represents county

"I came back to work with my head up."

employees. Local president Jeff Stulir and Council 31 Staff Representative Josh Schipp helped her file a grievance.


When the department's management refused to allow Baney to return to work, AFSCME took the dispute to arbitration.

The case took several months and left Baney without any income. She filed for unemployment insurance but was denied because the employer claimed she had quit. Eventually, Baney found another job at a veterinary clinic. She enjoyed the work, but the job wasn't union and her pay and benefits weren't as good as what she

had built with years of dedication at the county.

"I was worried, but I didn't give up," Baney said. "I've worked so much to get where I'm at. I wasn't going to let a 15-year-old job go down the drain. So I decided I'm going to do this for my kids. And then one day I got the call from Jeff. He said 'Ashley, you got your job back. You won your case.' I was so happy."

The arbitrator found that because the employer was alerted within hours of Baney's initial phone call that she did not in fact quit or resign, the employer had discharged Baney without just cause. The arbitrator ruled that Baney was to be reinstated with full back pay and benefits for the seven months she was out.

"I've never been through anything like this, and it was so tough. But it made me stronger," Baney said. "On January 14 I came back to work with my head up. I'm happy to be back with the animals. I plan on staying here until I retire." 

Easterseals employees win first contract, safer conditions

Working with young people ages 5 to 22 with a range of developmental disabilities, AFSCME Local 2515 members at Easterseals Academy in Machesney Park near Rockford help care for and educate students who face difficult barriers to learning.

Two years ago, these workers voted overwhelmingly to form a union with AFSCME because they wanted an avenue to stand up for safety and adequate staffing to ensure the best possible outcome for the vulnerable students in their classrooms.

"We formed our union because there wasn't any other

They never gave in, and in December, they ratified their first-ever union contract. But it wasn't easy. Management had long refused to budge at the table, insisting on a two-year contract with no wage increases and demonstrating little regard for the hard-working educators who make the school run.

"All we wanted was consistency and safety and the training and tools we need to help our students."

choice," said paraprofessional Brenda Schlueter, who has worked at the school for 10 years. "Either we gave in and accepted [management's] disrespect, or we kept demanding they show us respect."

"All we wanted was consistency and safety and the training and tools we need to help our students the way we should," Schlueter said. "But the administration was condescending, dismissive and



Jessie Barnes-Harris pickets for fair pay and safe working conditions with her fellow Local 2515 members.

disrespectful and it was really difficult to deal with at the table."

So the paraprofessionals, cooks, kitchen coordinators,

receptionists, bus drivers, job coaches and maintenance employees at the academy fought back. They held informational pickets and

worksite actions that garnered local media attention and took their case to the local school boards that fund the organization.

It worked. The bargaining committee secured a three-year deal with guaranteed across-the-board annual wage increases and bonuses. Plus, they won for the first time the rights only a union contract can provide: a grievance procedure ending in legally binding arbitration, a discipline procedure requiring progressive discipline for just cause only, and a mechanism to hold Easterseals responsible to the employees regarding safety measures.

Led by AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Sara Dornier, Schlueter was joined on the bargaining team by Christa Magnuson, Susan Erb, Angela Lewis, Rodney Moree and Stacy Euells.

"It was never about the money," Schlueter said. "It's about safety and staffing. We do this job because we love the kids and love helping them become the best version of themselves. I've seen some of the most miraculous achievements from our students."



Standing strong at DuPage County Care Center

Some 300 nursing, dining services, laundry and housekeeping staff at the DuPage County Care Center officially joined AFSCME as union members in November 2018. Three years later, they have their first union contract.

The unit organized in just a few months, voting for their union by signing enough authorization cards to gain certification from certification from the Illinois Labor Relations Board. But the fight was just beginning. Management at the public nursing home fought them every step of the way—and so did the pandemic, which kept members apart and buried with work because of crisis-level staffing shortages.

"Management was really fighting the union," CNA and

site secretary Missy Bennett said. "They tried to distract us and divide us because they know we're stronger when we're together. That's why we formed the union."

Bennett said staff wanted basic fair treatment and an end to favoritism, unfair discipline, and bad management practices. In fact, AFSCME had to file multiple unfair labor practice charges over the last three years and members participated in several informational pickets and directly lobbied

the DuPage County Board for support.

Employees were also fighting COVID-19 every day at their workplace and in their union-building. "COVID made it so difficult because it was hard to connect with the other employees," Bennett said. "Negotiations were halted several times; we lost members who left the job; we had several members sick."

"Despite the challenges, this bargaining team was able to restore three years of lost wage increases, guarantee raises going forward and dramatically lift starting wages to help address staffing concerns," Council 31 Staff Representative David Dorn said. "The average increase for regular employees is 20.8% by 2023. Additionally, we were able to secure a just-cause disciplinary standard, increased safety protections



Fighting for their first union contract, Cinda Rosenwinkel and other AFSCME members at DuPage County Care Center hold an informational picket.

and successfully fought off management making the lunch break an unpaid period."

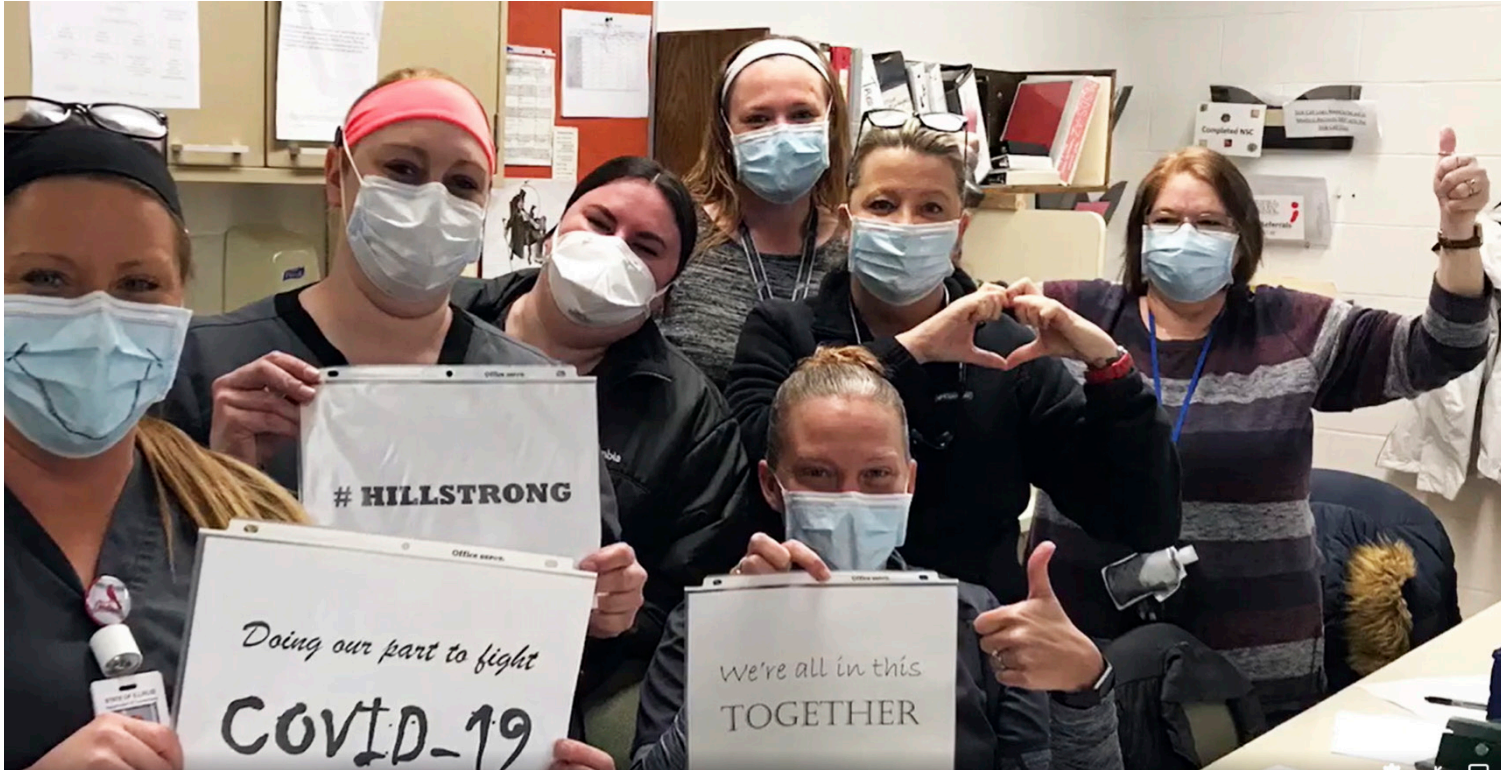
Dorn led negotiations with Staff Representative Carla Williams; the bargaining team included Bennett, Christine Branch, Ruben Capinpin, Lawrence Colvin, Laurie Cooper, Ed Curtain, Carolyn Paras and Cinda Rosenwinkel.

"It was a big battle and we got decent wage increases. It

should have been more, but we've laid the foundation and we can build on that in the next contract," Bennett said. "It was never just about the money. We go above and beyond for our residents. Had we not had the union, we wouldn't have gotten a voice and the opportunity to fight back for fairness in the workplace. Now we have it in writing that management has to be accountable to us."



ON THE LOCAL LEVEL



AFSCME Local 1274 members employed by Wexford Health Sources, Inc. show their pride at Hill Correctional Center.

Wexford employees stand united

More than 1,500 AFSCME members who work in correctional facilities across the state successfully negotiated a new contract with Wexford Health Sources, Inc., making gains that will help attract and retain much-needed health care staff at those facilities.

For more than two decades, the Illinois Department of Corrections has outsourced its health care services to Wexford. AFSCME members employed by the company include nurses, LPNs, CNAs, nurse practitioners, medical assistants, dental assistants, psychiatrists and mental health professionals.

Contract negotiations with the private company were colored by the fact that Wexford is in the process of rebidding for its contract with state government, which is set to end on June 30.

"The pandemic has dramatically changed the job market," said Council 31 Staff Representative Patricia Rensing, who led negotiations with Staff Representative Ty Petersen. "The severe nursing shortage that has developed in our state makes it ever more difficult for Wexford to fill vacancies unless salaries are competitive."

Wexford was committed to raising salaries only for certain classifications, but the 28-person bargaining committee stood strong and ultimately secured a 3.5%

across-the-board raise for every employee.

"We made them see a better way," bargaining committee member Marci Smith said. She works as a dental hygienist at Lawrence Correctional Center and is a member of Local 3600. "They realized we weren't going to give up on everyone getting an annual raise, so they did some adjustments so they could both raise all wages and match the market rate for the positions they needed to fill."

"We wouldn't settle for anything less than what we deserve."

"This is the highest percentage wage increase that I've ever seen, and I've been with the company since 2007," said Local 1274 member Casey Hodgeman, an LPN at Hill Correctional Center who served on the bargaining committee. "We also got a 2% increase on our anniversaries, which is a big win, especially for long-term employees."

The bargaining team also gained contractual language which provides that employees who accrue more than 80 hours of vacation time are automatically paid for that unused time. The prior contract required employees to submit paperwork to get those funds.

"People were losing their vacation time because they



AFSCME Local 2691 members at the American Red Cross in Illinois picketed in 2020 for safe working conditions and fair pay. They just won a new union contract.

would forget to request the payout," Smith said. "It was especially terrible for the nursing staff because they're working tons of hours and denied time off. So, if they forgot to do the paperwork, they didn't get the time off or the money owed to them."

The bargaining team was solid and felt good about the progress they made at the table with a difficult employer. Staying united was the key.

"This contract was a big win. The union makes everything stronger because we all stand together as a team," Hodgeman said. "We want what's best for all the employees. Everybody needs to have fair treatment. And we wouldn't settle for anything less than what we deserve."

"I started in 1997 before we were union," Smith said. "We didn't have paid lunch.

We didn't have the time off we have now. We didn't have the benefits we have now. I understand the struggles we've been through to get to where we're at. I am super appreciative of AFSCME and what we've accomplished together."

Big wage boost for Red Cross employees

AFSCME Local 2691 members at the American Red Cross in Illinois stood tough at the bargaining table to ensure fair pay for essential blood collection employees. National negotiations are still underway.

The "Heart of America Region" where some 110 AFSCME members work covers both mobile and fixed Red

Cross sites from Chicago to Quincy, Peoria to Champaign, and Bloomington to Peru.

Led by AFSCME Council 31 Staff Representative Rob Fanti, the bargaining committee included local president Bobbie Terrell, Tim Jacobs, Kamillia Alexander, Candy Hellyer, Hannah Doubet, Alison Austin and Colin Williams.

Together they showed solidarity, wearing Fair Contract Now buttons and pledging to picket if needed. Their determination was rewarded.

"Everyone will get a 10% raise," Terrell said. "New hires and employees who have been here less than four years will see the most drastic boost because we brought the wage floor up three or four dollars. Some of us will get as much as a 25% wage increase."

The American Red Cross is a nonprofit but reported nearly \$3 billion in revenue last year and paid its CEO more than \$700,000. At first, management of the Illinois region only wanted to boost wages for new hires as they struggle to fill positions. The starting wage before was under \$15 and now it's nearly \$19.

"You could go to Chik-fil-a or McDonalds and make the same amount of money, but avoid traveling, crazy hours and exposure to pathogens," Terrell said. "You may be in Chicago one day and St. Louis the next. One day you may start work at 4 a.m. and the next day 10 a.m. Nothing is regular so it was very challenging to get and keep staff with the wages they were offering."

The Red Cross provides about 40% of America's blood supply, all donated by volunteers. But because of the pandemic, the nonprofit announced a national shortage because of staffing limitations, blood drive cancellations and low donor turnout, especially from historically high-participating student donors.

The three-year contract covers wages, but health care benefits are negotiated at the national level where an 11-union coalition representing 4,900 Red Cross employees is publicly decrying exploitative working conditions, low pay and threats of cutting health insurance benefits. The contract expires at the end of March.

"Unionism is so important," Terrell said. "There's strength in numbers and you have to stick together."



AFSCME Local 1874 bargaining team members, from left to right: Cindy VanWitzenberg, Amanda Travis, Jalanda Taylor and Katie Cantrell.

Making gains at Kankakee County

AFSCME Local 1874 members at the Kankakee County's Circuit Clerk's office won significant wage increases in their new union contract, beating back management's attempt to freeze wages and eliminate job titles.

"Everyone is getting something," said Local President Jalanda Taylor, deputy administrative assistant to the chief deputy. "We got retro pay and a signing bonus of \$300."

But the most important win, she said, was making gains that will help attract new employees and reduce turnover by raising starting salaries. "We have such high turnover because we don't have enough money to keep people, but we really need to. So we made sure new people coming in got a big bump."

It almost didn't happen. "Management wasn't budging on anything," Taylor said. "They only wanted to give us one year and no raise, but we wore them down."

In negotiations, led by Council 31 Staff Representative Christian Hains, bargaining committee members Taylor, Katie Cantrell, Amanda Travis and Cindy VanWitzenberg eventually secured a four-year contract with wage increases of 15 to 25% for some 50 members.

Taylor said her fellow member Laurie Johnson, who has been at the county for almost 30 years, remembered what it was

like before the employees had formed their union. The workers never got any raises. They didn't have a voice.

"She knows what we've been through and what we're up against," Taylor said. "That's why we said we're not backing down. You won't have workers unless we have an agreement. Management

was talking about freezing wages and layoffs and we stopped it."

Staying strong in Schaumburg

AFSCME Local 1919 truly makes the Village of

Schaumburg work, with 130 members working in departments from finance to police and fire to building inspection. But when management refused to provide wage increases, a federal mediator was needed to settle the contract.

"We didn't want anything extraordinary, and everyone went in with a good attitude, but we wanted to be treated fairly and knew it would be a battle," Local President Kathryn Strack said. "Management thought we'd be fine taking no wage increases. We had to make it clear that's nothing we were interested in."

In addition to wages, the team wanted to clean up their relatively new contract, first signed in 2014.

"We had some major concerns," Strack said. "We especially wanted to change the contract to protect our members in case of another COVID-19 shutdown. We had to lay off a number of employees in 2020 and couldn't bring them back until late in 2021."

In the end, through mediation, the team secured wage increase retroactive to 2021, added bereavement

leave for part-time employees, improved language around disciplinary action and vacation time, and clarified layoff and recall rights.

Employees will see an average annual wage increase of about 3%, but the amount still depends on each employee's position in a performance-pay matrix. "That was the most frustrating part," Strack said. "We wanted to get on a guaranteed COLA and the village made it clear to us from the beginning that they were completely unwilling."

Negotiations were led by Council 31 Staff Representative Matthew Lange. Strack was joined on the bargaining committee by Vice President Nicole Serio, Secretary-Treasurer Norma Higgins and Debbie Diamond.

"Our goal from the beginning was making sure we don't lose anything and getting a few extra things added to the contract," Strack said, "so I am very happy that after nine months of very tough bargaining we were able to come back to our membership and say yes, you are getting an increase. We've made progress in this contract." 🦋

UNION MEMBERS GIVING BACK

AFSCME members often team up to give back to their communities, especially during the holiday season. Organizing a community service project or fundraiser is a great way to show how much union members care.

In November, AFSCME Local 46 (East Moline Correctional Center employees, pictured above) purchased more than 100 coats to be distributed to students in the East Moline School District #37. And AFSCME Local 3217 members at Knox County joined together to donate gifts to the local Red Cross for holiday stocking stuffers for 14- to 17-year-olds.

Members of AFSCME Local 2806 (South Chicago State Human Service Employees) participated in community efforts to give back. "We hung holiday decorations for families on Chicago's South Side that could not afford them," local president Larita Brown said. "And we partnered with a local charity organization to sponsor a



holiday toy drive for families in need."

Shalik Rhynes, a steward at AFSCME Local 2767, organizes an annual blanket drive for homeless and houseless individuals in the Springfield area through his fraternity, Phi Beta Sigma. His fellow union members at McFarland Mental Health Center always step up to contribute.

"Starting in September I collect blankets from friends, organizations, on Facebook, and of course from AFSCME members, who always support me in a big way," Rhynes said. "I'm trying to give back and pay it forward. It's about giving what you can. Every little bit helps. That's what makes the world better."

SHORT REPORTS



New AFSCME members at Whiteside Co. Health Dept, from left to right: Jeanne Nailor, Lindsey Peterson, Adrienne O'Brian, Stephanie Stichter, and Elvira Hernandez.

Union YES at Whiteside County Health Dept.

On Dec. 15, some 100 employees at Whiteside County Health Department won their union by mail-ballot election and were officially certified as AFSCME members by the Illinois Labor Relations Board.

"The employees at WCHD were in need of a union because of our overall dissatisfaction with management," said Stephanie Stichter, a registered nurse. "We need AFSCME to help us achieve fair and consistent policies and practices within the entire health department. Our union gives us a real voice and hopefully we can use it to build a better working relationship and atmosphere with our employer."

The employees had tried to make changes at their workplace, testifying to the Whiteside County Health Department board and writing them letters, but their concerns about fairness were never addressed. The workers were driven to the breaking point by a new department director who changed policies without notice, took away longstanding benefits, and fired and disciplined employees unjustly.

"The staff was being divided. They felt there was no one to turn to for help, no one they could trust," said Council 31 Organizer Jenny Marquis. "Organizing their union helped build relationships and friendships. It brought everyone together."

Staff united over heavy

workloads that compromised patient care. "We organized to support each other, so that we can better serve our community," advanced nurse practitioner Jeanne Nailor said.

"Now that we're union, I'm not afraid anymore," registered

"Because of our union, we have hope for a better future."

nurse Adrienne O'Brian said. The union has filed Unfair Labor Practice charges with the state labor board over management's unfair discipline and intimidation.

Now the new AFSCME members are holding elections for the bargaining committee and local union board. "Because of our union, we have hope for a better future at WCHD," medical secretary Julie Spurgeon said.

Member's detective skills reunite a mother and son

AFSCME Local 2953 executive board member and chief steward Serbekian Minas is an operational support officer with the Niles Police Department. He greets residents who walk into the police station for assistance and supports police officers in their work.

One day a woman came to the station distraught about her son Marco who had gone missing. Not fluent in Spanish, the mother's first language, Minas recruited fellow AFSCME member and records clerk Anita Protofanousis to translate.

The last time Marco's mother had contact with her son was the day before—in a brief call from Rawlins, Wyoming—and now his cell was dead. Minas saw the zip code of the small town and came up with a truck stop where he had likely been calling from. He called the gas station clerk and using the mother's description, found that the young man had indeed been there but left the night before.

Minas didn't stop there. He called the local police department, then left word with the Carbon County sheriff's office

that he was in search of any information on Marco.

"These buddies of Marco took off on him and left him high and dry, with no money, a dead cell phone and not the most fluent English," Minas said. "I was worried this would be like finding a needle in a haystack but I had a distraught mom who wanted to talk to her son, so I didn't give up."

Just 20 minutes later, an Officer Murphy called Minas' desk. Marco had been found walking alone on a busy highway. The two men worked on getting Marco and his mother connected on a phone call.

"Anita sat with her while she spoke with her son. They made arrangements for him to go to a nearby location where he could pick up wired money from his mom for bus fare to come back to Niles," Minas recounted. "All this took a little over an hour. I couldn't believe we got this kid and mom talking. It was pretty cool."

Word of the good work by Minas and Protofanousis spread through the station and the two were given Star Awards, a special recognition for employees who go above and beyond the call of duty. But Minas said he and Protofanousis were just acting on human nature, to help.

"I could see the angst in her eyes," Minas said. "How can I not help this woman as much

"How can I not help as much as I can and go the extra mile?"



AFSCME Local 2953 members Anita Protofanousis and Serbekian Minas were recognized for going above and beyond to help a distraught mother find her son.

as I can and go the extra mile? She's beside herself. She can't speak the language; she has no way of reaching her son. I am a parent too. It felt great to say mission accomplished."

AFSCME saves Christmas at the University of Illinois

AFSCME Local 698 members at the University of Illinois often have reduced service days over winter break between Christmas and New Year's Day because so few students are on campus that university operations for students are largely shut down.

Employees at the College of Veterinary Medicine's clinics, however, must work on Christmas Eve because of the nature of their services. In years past the university always made that time up to them: Employees were allowed to take another day off in place of the Christmas Eve holiday.

Then out of nowhere, two Christmases ago, the university decided to rescind the Christmas Eve "gift day" with no notice or explanation to the dedicated employees. The university cited a written personnel policy that no one knew about and hadn't been enforced in more than 20 years.

"AFSCME filed a grievance and took the case to pre-arbitration, arguing that past practice is undisputed, unequivocal, clear and existed over a reasonable period of time," Council 31 legal counsel Lindsay Evans said. "The long-standing practice of granting a full gift day to Vet Med employees who work on December 24 is an implied contract term and cannot be changed unilaterally by the university. It's binding."

The union prevailed. In an unexpectedly strong ruling late last year by arbitrator Jacalyn Zimmerman, the university was ordered to abide by the past practice of granting a gift day until any change in the practice is negotiated with AFSCME.

"It's among the clearest and most union-positive ruling on past practice we've seen," Evans said.

Just in time for the holidays, Vet Med employees got their Christmas Eve gift day.



RETIREE NOTES



Like many of their fellow sub-chapters, AFSCME retiree sub-chapter 55 made a financial contribution to Eldorado First Baptist Church Meal Ministry and other community organizations during the recent holiday season.



A life dedicated to justice

LONGTIME AFSCME ACTIVIST Jay Ferraro received the Lifetime Achievement Award from Rockford United Labor in October in recognition of his contributions to the labor movement in the greater Rockford region.

Now the president of Retiree Sub-chapter 69 in Rockford, Ferraro joined AFSCME in 1973 as a member working at the city of Rockford Water Department. There he served as steward, vice-president and president of Local 1058. In 1979, he was elected to the AFSCME Council 31 executive board. During his tenure, he helped workers organize unions at the Rockford Housing Authority, Rockford Public Library, Rockford Public Schools District 205, and Winnebago County.

In 1984, Ferraro became a staff representative with Council 31, working in the Quad Cities, Rockford, DeKalb, Freeport, and Dixon. Upon retiring

in 2011 he immediately joined AFSCME Retirees Chapter 31. He became Secretary for Rockford United Labor the same year. Today he is not only President of his Retiree Sub-chapter but an executive board member of Chapter 31 as well.

“The labor movement in Illinois has greatly benefited from Jay’s lifetime of activism and dedication to the rights of working people,” RUL President Sara Dorner said. “He serves as an inspiration to so many of us and we thank him.”

Build Back Better—how it will help seniors

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN’S Build Back Better plan has stalled in the U.S. Senate due to opposition from every Republican as well as Democrats Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin. The proposed package would bring positive change to the lives of millions of Americans. Senior citizens would benefit in a variety of ways, including:

- **Lower Health Care Costs:** The Build Back Better plan would add dental, vision, and hearing coverage to Medicare. It would also lower prescription drug costs by letting Medicare negotiate drug prices, so consumers are no longer at the whim of pharmaceutical companies.
- **Greater Access to Long-Term Care Services:** Aging individuals and people with disabilities deserve high-quality care that meets their unique needs and personal choices. The Build Back Better Act would invest

AFSCME RETIREES GIVE BACK

Retiree sub-chapters are focused on giving back to their communities, especially during the recent holiday season. Here are some of the organizations that benefited from the contributions of AFSCME retiree sub-chapters statewide:


- 4C’s Homeless Shelter & Food Pantry
- Alzheimer’s Foundation of Northern IL • BASICS, DeKalb County • Bloom Township Food Pantry, Buddy Bags
- CASA of Saline County • CCBA Food Pantry • Centralia Youth Center
- Citizens Utility Board • Coats for Kids, Union County • Community Food Basket in Ottawa • CRAFT Scholarships Program • Dixon Food Pantry • DuPage Family Shelter Service • DuPage Pads • Eldorado First Baptist Church Meal Ministry
- Emergency Rescue Corp • Erie Family Health Clinic, Waukegan
- Family Service Agency, DeKalb County • Fortitude Homeless Shelter • Galesburg FISH Food Pantry • Gallatin County Food Pantry • Goodfellows of Lee County • Harbor House Abuse Shelter • Hardin County Golden Circle
- Home to School Connection at Centralia City Schools • Honor Flight
- Hope Haven Emergency Shelter,

- DeKalb County • Humane Society
- Illinois Labor History Society • KFL-CSI-Kankakee Charity • Kumlar Food Pantry, Springfield • LaSalle Veterans Home • Livingston County Cops and Kid Program • Livingston County Food Pantry • Loaves & Fishes • Midwest Veteran’s Homeless Shelter • Northern Illinois Food Bank • PADS of Dixon • Red Cross of Quincy • Rockford Cancer Walk
- Salvation Army • Salvation Army of Quincy • Sandoval Shalom Food Pantry • Sangamon County’s Fifth Street Renaissance • Senior Center of Quanada • St. Vincent DePaul, Dixon
- Sterling Food Bank • Toys for Tots • Veterans Assistance Commission, DeKalb County • Veteran’s Assistance Commission, Kankakee County • Veterans Quilt of Honor, Decatur • Veterans Wreaths Across America, Anna IL • West Suburban Food Pantry
- YWCA of Sterling

billions toward expanding access to quality, affordable home- or community-based services.

• **More Affordable Housing:** The Build Back Better plan includes \$500 million in

additional funding for Section 202 housing, a program of the Department of Housing and Urban Development that benefits low-income older individuals. These provisions would

help current and future retirees, and the average working American family. That’s why AFSCME continues to urge Congress to pass the Build Back Better Act. 

BATTLING OMICRON TWO YEARS INTO PANDEMIC

AFSCME MEMBERS HAVE BEEN on the front-lines of the COVID-19 pandemic since it hit Illinois nearly two years ago. From sanitation workers to correctional officers, classroom paraprofession-



als to caregivers at disability agencies, AFSCME members are keeping our state working and making a difference every day.

In December, the omicron variant

emerged. Although case numbers spiked, the world watched as the vaccines did their work, preventing untold thousands of needless hospitalizations and deaths.

AFSCME members in public health programs across the state have been front and center through all the ups and downs of this fight. These are just two of their stories.

BETH POPE

AFSCME Local 2833 member Beth Pope is a Health Facilities Surveyor for the Illinois Department of Public Health in DuPage County. Her job is to inspect skilled nursing homes to ensure they follow regulations to protect their vulnerable residents.

“Our teams go into nursing homes with COVID outbreaks to be sure they’re following infection control procedures. I’ve been working so many hours. We’re seeing again a lot of isolations. But the good news is people aren’t dying like they were in the early days of the pandemic.

“It’s challenging because the guidelines from the CDC are changing. It’s week by week and sometimes day by day. For instance, how long does a nursing home employee have to be out if they test positive? What about if they’re vaccinated, or now boosted? Everything is a moving target and we’re all just trying to keep up.

“I’ve worked in long-term care for more than 25 years, and since COVID the nursing home world has turned upside down. The facilities are struggling for adequate staffing, creating a tough situation for residents and staff. On top of staffing shortages, there are so many staff out for COVID-positive results. The situation is extreme.

“What keeps me going is visiting with the residents. Advocating for them when they can’t do it for themselves makes it worth all of this. And it’s



a team effort. There are a lot of people out here trying to make sure they’re taken care of.”

DR. JENNIFER CREW

AFSCME Local 2258 member Jennifer Crew (pictured above) is the virology lab supervisor at the Illinois Department of Public Health in Chicago. She holds a Ph.D. in genetics and has worked for the state for nearly 15 years.

“With omicron specimen testing, volume is going up and we’ve been getting lots of positives.

“If you’re fully vaccinated and boosted, even if you get it, you won’t get as sick. And you also will be less likely to give it to somebody else. The

vaccine is not just to protect yourself but to protect everybody.

“Our lab is affected by supply chain issues like everywhere else. Things we ordered a year ago haven’t come in yet. And during all that, we’ve had several staff out sick with COVID, which

makes things difficult. We’re constantly training new people. We’re starting to have staff burn out because people are just exhausted after two years of this. It’s hard to keep going at this rate all time.

“There are two other labs for the state, in Springfield and Carbondale. Mostly what we

test are specimens from state facilities like veterans’ retirement homes, prisons and homes for developmentally disabled adults, all where AFSCME members work. We also do testing for some hospital clinics that serve more vulnerable populations, some county coroner offices, and if a hospital has a huge outbreak, we’ll help them out.

“We’re running a general test that picks up any variant of COVID. When something is positive on the general test for COVID, then we do sequencing on it to find out what kind of variant it might be. Omicron is starting to peak so now we’ll have to see if we’ll be able to find whatever comes after omicron.

“We test in batches of 100 and if everything goes right, it takes about an hour and a half of hands-on time and another two hours on an instrument. In December we did 12,000 specimens for the month, about 3,000 a week.

“At the state labs, we pretty much get everything done and reported in two days. The private labs can take a lot longer. That’s why we’re doing the testing that really helps vulnerable populations like those in congregate living facilities, because if there’s an outbreak there, they need to know as soon as possible to take the measures to keep it contained.

“AFSCME negotiated us hazard pay, COVID time off, and an extra personal day. If we hadn’t been part of the union, they would have had us working 24/7, 365. This is my job and I’m here to help people, but at some point, management needs to realize we’re all human beings; we need sleep and time with our families. I’m so grateful we’re union.”

2021 IN REVIEW

1,184,256
NEW COVID-19 INFECTIONS

30,386
NEW COVID-19 CASES
ON DEC. 30 SHATTERS SINGLE-
DAY RECORD IN ILLINOIS

11,396
DEATHS

31,192,187
COVID-19 TESTS PROCESSED

19,046,136
VACCINE DOSES ADMINISTERED

3,077,848
BOOSTER DOSES ADMINISTERED