

Peoria Journal-Star

When state requires charity, it's a tax

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It's good to hear that Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan is rethinking her desire to *force* hospitals to give more to *charity*, else we might have had to sentence her to a long weekend with Mr. Webster and his dictionary.

In January, Madigan unveiled proposals to require not-for-profit hospitals to spend 8 percent of their annual operating costs on charity care, while also making them play nicer in their debt-collection practices. Illinois hospitals cried foul. She retreated.

It's not just that one-third of Illinois hospitals are in the red. Not just that they're already expected to eat the difference between their actual costs and Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements. Not just that Illinois hospitals already provide \$1.2 billion in charity care, between outright benevolence and the non-collection of debt - Peoria's OSF St. Francis totaled \$54 million last year, Methodist about \$16 million. Not just that Madigan would have charged hospitals an extra \$739 million, which would have been passed on to paying customers already getting socked with shifted costs.

It's that Madigan apparently doesn't know the meaning of charity, which must be freely given to qualify as such, not coerced. If it's an "obligation," as she put it, then it's a tax, not just on hospitals but health-care consumers. This was a bad idea, all the way around. Again, glad to hear she's having second thoughts after not thinking through it the first time.