

CHANGE Illinois

Coalition for Honest and New Government Ethics

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The Civic Federation
Common Cause Illinois
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Illinois PIRG
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The Joyce Foundation
Latino Policy Forum
League of Women Voters of Illinois
Openlands
Protestants for the Common Good
The United Congress of Community
and Religious Organizations
Woods Fund of Chicago

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NEW COALITION VOWS TO CHANGE ILLINOIS LEADERS UNITE TO END CULTURE OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN ILLINOIS

CHICAGO – A coalition of civic, business, professional, non-profit and philanthropic organizations on Thursday launched a campaign to combat Illinois’ culture of political corruption and urged other citizens to join in the battle to demand honest government.

The first priority of the non-partisan *CHANGE Illinois* coalition will be to reduce the influence of large campaign contributors by enacting strict limits on the amount of money that can be given to candidates and political action committees.

CHANGE Illinois advocates replacing the state’s unregulated campaign finance system with one modeled after the contribution limit system in place at the federal level and in almost all other states. Contribution limits, combined with more frequent public reporting of contributions and strengthened oversight of campaign finance laws, would put Illinois on the road to real reform.

CHANGE Illinois will be led by co-chairs Peter Bensingler, former Administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency; Deborah Harrington, President, Woods Fund of Chicago; and George A. Ranney, President and CEO of Chicago Metropolis 2020. The growing coalition includes an impressive number of outstanding citizens and organizations prepared for a long-term commitment to reform. (A list of the founding coalition members is attached, and more will be added in the future.)

“AARP has nearly 2 million members in Illinois, and the vast majority of them vote – so when the issues we represent them on like health care reform and fair utility rates don’t move forward, you’ve got to wonder why,” said Bob Gallo, AARP Illinois State Director, and a member of the coalition’s steering committee. “For too long, we’ve seen business as usual stand in the way of progress as it should be. Something has got to change.”

In partnership with its members, the *CHANGE Illinois* coalition plans to build a grassroots network that will keep the spotlight on reform. We will offer a blueprint for change and help citizens who share our concerns become active in the state's growing reform movement. A statewide speakers bureau, policy maker briefings, community

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forums, editorial board meetings, a web-based petition drive, advertising, and online communications will be used to educate citizens and mobilize public support for the steps needed to restore confidence in the political system. To initiate this effort, the coalition has launched a website (www.CHANGEIL.org).

“Illinoisans wanting to change the status quo of recurring scandals must step forward and press their legislative representatives for the change that is so desperately needed,” Bensinger said. “Illinois has many outstanding and well-meaning public servants, and we know many will join us in this mission. However, their success in reforming the political system requires an involved electorate.

“A succession of high profile political scandals has left Illinoisans dismayed with politics as usual in Illinois,” Bensinger said. “We have witnessed an alarming retreat from the basic values essential to a well-functioning democracy: honesty, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and fairness.”

“The rules of the political process have been deliberately manipulated and applied in ways that nearly always advantage incumbent officeholders, large donors, and political insiders,” Harrington said. “We need new rules that will advantage ordinary citizens who have neither the resources nor influence to be heard.

“Corruption in government impacts all of us,” Harrington continued. “It leads to wasteful spending; makes it more expensive to do business in Illinois; and thwarts an honest debate of critical issues.”

“Historically in Illinois, voices with influence in Springfield have spoken only about legislation that matters to their organization or interest,” Ranney said. “Today, we stand with long-time advocates of reform and give increased volume to their voices. We recognize that changing Illinois for the better – whether it be better schools, roads or any other important issue – requires changing government.

“Anyone interested in changing government, especially in Illinois, understands that the first target must be the money that drives the election system and too often influences legislative debates and fuels corruption and fraud,” Ranney said.

Cynthia Canary, Director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform (ICPR), said the creation of the coalition and the determination of its members is cause for optimism but also a reflection of the attitude of the general public.

“Recent polling found a majority of Illinoisans believe corruption is common among public officials, but they also believe that reform efforts are worthwhile,” Canary said. “About three-quarters of Illinois voters said an overhaul of our weak campaign finance regulation system would make state government work better, and similar overwhelming majorities favor limiting the amount of money that can be contributed to political campaigns.”

(Complete results of the survey commissioned and funded by The Joyce Foundation are available at www.ChangeIL.org.)

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“Just as removing one officeholder will not clean up all of government, the coalition recognizes that campaign finance reform is not an elixir to the problem,” Harrington said. “However, setting contribution limits is the best place to begin a long-term effort to make state government more representative of Illinoisans and more responsive to all citizens.”

The coalition members agree that there are many avenues for political reform, including an end to gerrymandering of legislative districts, more openness in government, more public information about the economic interests of government officials, and tighter regulation of lobbying. Those and other ideas will be examined in the coming months.

Anyone interested in joining the coalition or learning more about its mission should visit its website (www.ChangeIL.org).

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