



March 16, 2009

**Illinois General Assembly
Joint Committee on Government Reform**

**AARP Testimony
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Senate President Cullerton, House Speaker Madigan, and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discuss the need for campaign contribution limits. I commend you for holding these public hearings on this critical issue.

My name is Bob Gallo, and I serve as Senior State Director for AARP in Illinois. AARP has over 40 million members nationally and nearly 2 million in Illinois.

I want to thank the members of the Joint Committee for their past support of AARP's issues and concerns.

The majority of our members have nothing but the highest respect for their lawmakers as most are hard working, honest individuals who have the public's best interest at heart. It is not my intention to cast a broad negative generalization upon all Illinois legislators. However, we have a broken system in Illinois that needs to be fixed. The lack of campaign contribution limits is causing a free flow of money through these halls, and it is causing the voice of the public to be silenced.

AARP is a nonpartisan, non-profit membership association. We don't support political candidates, we don't have Political Action Committees and we don't donate any money to political parties or candidates.

Our power is in our membership and our members vote. Nearly one hundred percent of them are registered to vote, and over seventy percent vote in nearly every election. Voters age fifty and older account for the largest voting population in every election.

At both the state and national level our member's count on us to work with elected officials to address critical issues, such as the growing economic and health care crisis.

AARP serves as our members' voice in their state Capitols on the issues that matter most to them.

In Illinois, too often the voice of the people is muted by special interest groups, whose power seems to rest solely on the campaign donations they make in order to advance their interests.

In this state we have a golden rule: *Those that have the gold make the rules.* We find out very quickly that this means those who make large campaign contributions seem to make the rules.

This "golden rule" was exhibited forcefully during the 2007 legislative session. With the utility rate freeze in Illinois having expired and a new rate auction in place, customers were facing a record rate hike. This was an important issue to

our membership as older individuals spend a much higher percentage of their income on utility costs and would be badly hurt by the anticipated increases if the freeze was allowed to expire.

AARP, and consumer advocates from across the state fought the rate auction and the increase as it would expose consumers to excessively high increases in their utility bills. State wide efforts from a broad coalition of groups urged the passage of legislation to continue with the freeze.

After heavy lobbying by the utility industry matched by massive campaign contribution, the legislation to continue the freeze failed. While billion dollar utility relief legislation was eventually signed into law, due to the utility rate freeze ending consumers were hit with anywhere from a forty to a three hundred percent increase in their utility bills, causing severe hardships for many.

A recent AARP survey now finds that since the recession began, nearly 44% of Americans are struggling to pay for their utility services. Illinois lawmakers stood in prime position to prevent this in our state, but the voice of the high-powered, deep pocketed utility industry won and the people lost.

This highlights a problem. AARP volunteers, who come to this Capitol to advance our issues, see it all too frequently – well paid lobbyists for companies and industries that often make large campaign contributions tend to have better

access and a bigger voice in state politics. The result is that many times, good legislation does not advance.

This year, as record job losses are causing more people to lose their employer-sponsored health coverage, AARP has made it a top priority to make the health industry fair and responsible when it comes to providing coverage for individuals, families, the self-employed and small businesses. The insurance industry historically has spent a lot on campaign donations and will no doubt spend what it takes to defeat this legislation.

These examples highlight in part the dire need for campaign contribution limits in Illinois. For too long we've seen business as usual in Illinois stand in the way of progress as it should – we need to change things we need to do it now.

The cost of running for office has had a dampening effect on potential candidates. Often qualified candidates choose not to run for election because of the pressure to raise large sums of money. Candidates commonly raise money from special-interest groups, and overwhelmingly these funds originate from outside the candidate's district or state.

The cost of running campaigns and the need to raise money often makes it more difficult for elected officials to devote their time to representing constituents.

Former lawmakers have estimated that approximately a third of a U.S. Senators'

time is spent on fund raising, taking time away from issues that matter most to their constituents, including older Americans.

Illinois is one of only a handful of states that has virtually no campaign contribution limits, and has been cited by Brennan Center for Justice for having the weakest campaign finance laws in the Midwest.

AARP represents the needs and concerns of people age 50 and older, and that age group finds Illinois politics in a deplorable state. A recent survey commissioned by the Joyce Foundation found that of Illinoisans age 50 and older; nearly sixty percent are extremely concerned about the influence of money in state politics while over seventy percent of those surveyed are extremely concerned about corruption in state government. Seventy percent agree that unless we limit the influence of money in government, elected officials will not be able to keep their promises on issues that are important to the people.

While AARP typically does not become involved in government reform issues, sometimes we don't have a choice. In Illinois, the voices, concerns and needs of the voters and the public are being muted by special interests that make big campaign donations so issues like health care reform and fair utility rates don't see the light of day. We've got a problem and we need solutions. That is why AARP has joined with the CHANGE Illinois coalition efforts. We're looking to

you, our state lawmakers to make the changes the people of Illinois need and deserve. We are looking to you to get this state back on the right track.

There are those that say putting a cap on campaign contributions prevents or limits freedom of speech of corporate and special interests in politics. I strongly disagree. Enacting campaign contribution limits in Illinois will only serve to make the public's and voter's voices stronger.

AARP stands in support of campaign contribution limits. Limits on individual contributions and contributions to and by political action committees should be strictly enforced. Limits on bundling campaign contributions and other avenues used to evade contribution limits should be imposed. There should be regulation limiting the build up and carryover of "war chests." Illinois should enact legislation that closely mirrors the federal campaign contribution limits.

Our members are concerned now, more than ever, about government dysfunction. At a time when Illinois is facing a fiscal crisis there is also a crisis of confidence from Illinois voters who do not trust that their elected officials will do what is in the public's best interest.

This issue must be addressed. The people of Illinois deserve to get their voice back.

AARP is ready to work with you to restore public confidence in Illinois government. These hearings are a move in the right direction to addressing the many problems facing the political system in Illinois.

