

# More money for state mammogram screening program

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Thousands of impoverished Illinois women who are on waiting lists for screening mammograms will be aided by new funding for the Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Program.

Kelly Jakubek, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Public Health, confirmed today that \$4.7 million in extra money is being given to the program to help eliminate the backlog. Faced with budget cuts, several [Chicago](#) medical centers had stopped offering mammograms to women seeking services from the program. Screening mammograms help identify breast cancer in early stages, when it is most easily treated and least likely to be life-threatening.

In 2009, the Breast and Cervical Center Program had a budget of \$20.6 million; this year, in the midst of the state's budget crisis, funding was reduced by \$3.5 million.

As programs began running out of money late last year, 4,000 women were put on waiting lists for screening mammograms, while those with clearly identifiable lumps in their breast continued to receive services.

By June, waiting lists were expected to swell to 10,000 women, according to Anne Marie Murphy, director of the [Chicago](#) Breast Cancer Quality Consortium.

"I was so disappointed when I called for an appointment in January and they told me no, we don't have any funds left, we can't help you," said Francine Gill, 64, of [Chicago](#), who sought care at Mercy Hospital and Medical Center.

"It was hard for us turning women away after all the outreach we've done to educate them about how important it is to get mammograms," said Eileen Knightly, director of the breast center at Mercy Hospital and vice chair of the Metropolitan [Chicago](#) Breast Cancer Task Force.

Last week, advocates and women waiting for mammograms began public protests, confronting Gov. Patrick Quinn at a groundbreaking on the [South Side](#) and demonstrating in front of the James R. Thompson Center.

Without dependable funding, women would lose confidence in the program, they warned.

Told about the state's decision to allocate the extra money, Knightly said, "I applaud the governor's actions. I know he's in a very difficult position. This is so important to keeping the women of Illinois healthy."

"The ability to open the program back up will be a huge benefit to our patients," said Amy Valukas, senior director of youth and community programs at Erie Family Health Center in [Chicago](#).

Gill, who has struggled to find work since losing a long-time job and health insurance at a not-for-profit agency, now plans to call Mercy Hospital for another mammogram appointment. "I'm so relieved I won't have to put this off," she said.

The Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Program is open to any woman, regardless of her ability to pay. It offers free mammograms, breast exams, pelvic exams and PAP smears and refers women with abnormalities for further evaluation and follow up care. The vast majority of women who sign up are low income. About 33,000 women receive mammograms through the program each year.

-- *Judith Graham*