



Quinn bill merits no badge of efficiency

By Seth N. Stratton

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With the dark cloud of fiscal crisis settled over Massachusetts, government programs throughout the commonwealth are in jeopardy. Public employees, social program beneficiaries, town administrators, and taxpayers fear the implications of ever-shrinking revenues flowing into state coffers.

But two groups who don't seem too worried are state legislators and police unions. Beacon Hill legislators pawned the state's budget problems off on a lame duck acting governor. And police unions knew that their crown jewel--the Police Career Incentive Pay Program, better known as the Quinn bill--would avoid being slashed, lest politicians face their wrath in November.

The Quinn bill, initially championed by former Massachusetts Attorney General Robert H. Quinn in the early 70's, set up an incentive program that awards police officers who earn higher education degrees with pay increases. They gain a 10 percent boost for an associate's degree, 20 percent for a bachelor's degree and 25 percent for a master's or law degree. The state splits the cost of the raises with cities and towns that opt into the program.

It sounds like a good idea--encourage police officers to enhance their education and professional abilities by rewarding them financially for their hard work. But as the program expanded and more communities opted in, it became apparent that the actual effect of the law bore little resemblance to the original intent.

An amendment unwisely limited the program to degrees in law enforcement, and by the mid-1980's "diploma mills" were sprouting up in response to the increasing number of officers looking to qualify for pay raises. Many programs failed to enforce attendance policies, required no work outside of class, were held in union halls and police stations, were taught by police officers with few qualifications, and awarded course credits for police academy training and "life experience."

In short, many diplomas were not worth the paper on which they were printed.

Sadly, little has changed. Some of these same programs, light on academic standards but heavy on degree credits, are still brimming with students and have proven to be "cash cows" for the schools that run them.

But don't blame the police officers. Who among us wouldn't be tempted by a 20 percent raise in return for taking a few dubious courses? Increasing numbers of officers continue to sign up, and that's why the Quinn bill is breaking the bank.

When Boston finally decided to participate in 2000, police salaries skyrocketed. Largely due to Quinn bill increases, 630 Boston police officers--roughly 30 percent of the force--earned over \$100,000 last year.

With total taxpayer cost for the program approaching \$100 million dollars this year, it just doesn't seem like we're getting our money's worth.

There is no simple answer to the problem. The law's language commits the commonwealth to reimburse cities and towns for costs during the previous year. If the state reneges on its share, local communities will be left high and dry.

But there are viable options for reform. Enforceable standards should be established to ensure that only rigorous degree programs qualify under the law. But those programs should include degrees in fields such as social work, psychology, and public administration, not just law enforcement.

Expanding eligibility for a program that is already too expensive seems unwise at first glance. But by excluding bogus degree programs and encouraging high quality

ones, cost increases would remain in check and taxpayers would get a more professional police force in return for their investment.

Finally, under current law, an officer making \$50,000 receives a 20 percent (\$10,000) boost the first year after earning a bachelor's degree. But as the officer's base salary increases, that 20 percent raise gets larger each year. Flat salary hikes--say \$5,000 for earning a bachelor's degree--would both preserve the incentive and reign in costs. In the long term, it would also reduce the base pay on which pensions are calculated.

Neither the fiscal crisis nor the Quinn bill's spiraling costs look to be going anywhere soon. The outcome of this issue, like so many other issues, this one will come down to a question of will turn on whether the political courage exists to do something about it. If the recently passed budget is any indication, things don't look good.

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