

Liberals form Kennedy-chaired think tank here



GREG HINZ ON POLITICS

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Christopher Kennedy will head Innovation Illinois.

Leading Illinois liberals are forming a well-endowed think tank here, hoping to offset the influence of Gov. Bruce Rauner and resurgent conservative Republicans.

Innovation Illinois will be led by former aides to ex-Gov. Pat Quinn with a board chaired by Christopher Kennedy, who recently stepped down as chair of the University of Illinois board. Focusing on research and public commentary, it is designed to be a sort of counterweight to **the Illinois Policy Institute**, a libertarian group that has rolled out policy papers on pensions and other items and helped staff Rauner's administration.

"Too often in Springfield, the debates leave out the poor and the working class," said co-founder John Kamis, a former city staff member and attorney who oversaw Quinn's performance-based budgeting panel. "Good policy moves from the inside out. We want to provide a voice."

The new group is "a progressive think tank" designed to "look at the best policies and practices in other states," said interim CEO Michelle Saddler, who was secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services and briefly served as Quinn's chief of staff. The state can't just

"cater to the job creators and the rich," she said. "We're going to provide a counterbalancing voice."

Kennedy is traveling out of the country and was unavailable for comment.

Some other fairly well-known folks who will serve on the Innovation Illinois board with him include Chicago Federation of Labor President Jorge Ramirez, Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago economist Roger Myerson, Willis Group Managing Partner John Atkinson and Jay Rowell, a former deputy secretary at the Illinois Department of Employment Security.

The message the group really wants to get out is that "sometimes, government does things that are good," Saddler said. That means talking about issues such as education, labor, health care and entrepreneurship—and most particularly about big budget cuts that Rauner has proposed in most of those areas, he said.

The group has received "hundreds of thousands of dollars" in financial backing, with the source of some but not all of it eventually to be disclosed, Kamis said. The group will not formally lobby or endorse candidates.

"We're not a PAC," he said. "We're a research organization."

Saddler said she hopes the group within two or three years will reach the size of the similar **Innovation Ohio**, which has a staff of about 30.

While the group is somewhat similar to the Illinois Policy Institute, "they have a very strict ideology," Kamis said. "I think we will be much more solution-based."

Here's Illinois Policy Institute CEO John Tillman's take, via email:

"For 12 years allies promoting the same ideas as Innovation Illinois have had monopoly control of state government. Those very policies have failed to help the poor rise or the state as a whole prosper. We are grateful there are new voices but now is time for new ideas, not a rehash of those already proven to have failed the poor and middle class."

Original Article:

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