

## **Iowa bill would cut state funding of cities that reduce spending on law enforcement**

Mary Stroka

Feb 17, 2021

Iowa cities and counties would be ineligible to receive any state funds if they reduce the budget of a law enforcement agency under their jurisdiction, if a bill introduced Tuesday in the Iowa Senate becomes law.

(The Center Square) – Iowa cities and counties would be ineligible to receive any state funds if they reduce the budget of a law enforcement agency under their jurisdiction, if a bill introduced Tuesday in the Iowa Senate becomes law.

The bill, SSB 1203, has been referred to the State Government Committee.

Under the proposed law, the state would not provide funds to the city or county after the fiscal year in which the law enforcement agency's budget was reduced unless they also reduce their total budget "by an equal or larger percentage."

To regain state funding, the city or county would need to reform the budget that violates the proposed law. Then, the local government would regain funding on the first day of the month following the end of the violation.

There are some exceptional circumstances: reductions related to one-time capital, equipment or vehicle purchases in the prior fiscal year; lower personnel cost of law enforcement personnel "due only to lower cost entry-level" personnel replacing other law enforcement personnel; merging or consolidation of jail service or communications and dispatch services or the merging of law enforcement agencies; or reduced population in the law enforcement agency's jurisdiction.

Heartland Institute Director of Government Relations Cameron Sholty said the bill "could adversely affect" the local property taxpayer if a local unit of government reduces its law enforcement budget, depending on how the local government addresses any budget shortfall.

Anytime the state withholds funding for any given reason, there is a real risk – absent levy controls on the local units of government – that the shortfall is made up by the local property taxpayer, Sholty told The Center Square in an email.

"Assuming the local unit of government receives the lion's share of its funding from the property taxpayer, by reducing the amount spent on law enforcement, the state would withhold funds (depending on any applicable formula) in a proportionate amount," Sholty said.

"That would leave a hole in the local budget that would likely need to be filled absent new/growing sources of revenue," Sholty continued. "With that said, the local unit of government can always choose to not fill that hole, and then the net effect would be a decreased budget and less pressure to raise taxes."

Vice President for Criminal Justice at The Cato Institute Clark Neily told The Center Square in a phone interview the bill appears to “taking a side” on the national discussion of when it is appropriate to have the police as the first line of response to certain problems and “shutting down other voices” in favor of continuing to use police services in the same way as has been done.

Neily said this is the first time he has heard of a state attempting to freeze current funding for law enforcement at the local level.

“It strikes me as extraordinarily unwise and, again, out of sync with what I perceive to be the national discussion on police reform,” he said.

“I don’t see why any local jurisdiction should not be able to experiment with reassigning responsibility for at least some of those situations to a non law enforcement entity, like social workers, mental health professionals, something of that nature. To me, there’s a sense in which this bill seems to pre-judge and represent a decision that everything we’ve been using police for is appropriate and does not need to be re-thought.”

The bill also does not make provision for a local jurisdiction to reduce the size of a law enforcement agency in response to a reduction in the crime rate, he added.

“In effect, it creates a ratchet: If you’re a local jurisdiction, you’re welcome to spend more money on law enforcement, but you’re not permitted to spend less money on law enforcement,” Neily said. “So if crime goes up, you can hire more police and more prosecutors to address it. But if crime goes down, you’ve got to keep the same number of police and prosecutors on the payroll. And I don’t think that makes fiscal sense