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Iris Salters

Let's halt open season on public school workers



It seems to be open season on public school employees -- all under the guise of purported "fiscal responsibility."

In Southfield, school board members this week fired 350 of their neighbors when they voted to privatize or contract out transportation, custodial and maintenance jobs. Never mind that the move leaves some of their students' parents unemployed and opens the door to bringing strangers into our school buildings.

Then there is the assault on school employees' medical privacy.

In Van Buren County, the Lawton school district demanded detailed medical information from some of its employees and their families, including waiving their medical privacy rights under federal law. In the name of trying to save money, this small district wants to know who's suffering from depression, has cancer or is taking prescription medication.

The district says it wants the information to share with another insurance company to get another bid for coverage. It claims that a law passed last fall by the Legislature, Public Act 106, allows the district to do this.

Anyone who values their privacy -- especially their medical privacy -- should be concerned about this latest development. Employees shouldn't be asked to sacrifice something that most Americans feel is important, even in the name of "cost containment."

In the wrong hands, such information could have been used to discriminate in employment decisions. Or employees could lose coverage they need if the district decides some provision in the health plan is over-used and too expensive.

No employee should have to give up this kind of medical information to an employer. This information should be confidential between you and your doctor and your insurance company. Your boss has no right to know whether you or your family member has suffered from cancer or takes anti-anxiety medication.

When the Legislature considered enacting this law, it was warned repeatedly that it could open the door to privacy breaches. Those fears have become reality for some Lawton school employees -- and the law does nothing to protect them or other public employees from this invasion of privacy.

Legislators keen on allowing districts to cut healthcare benefits and to send community dollars out of state created an environment where the school district's bottom line is considered far more important than individuals' medical privacy concerns or stable communities.

As the only privacy protection it offers, PA 106 calls for release of claims data to aid in competitive bidding only for larger districts. Smaller districts -- like Lawton -- were exempted to protect the medical history of individuals. It's too easy to figure out who has what ailment or who takes what medicine when only a handful of people are asked to reveal this information.

Imagine then, what happens when Lawton's employees were asked if they or their dependents had been treated during the past 10 years for such ailments as cancer, HIV or AIDS, allergies or multiple sclerosis. Or whether they or their dependents suffered from anxiety, depression, autism or eating disorders, and to list the medications they had been prescribed over the previous year. And that their names were tied to their answers.

All employees deserve privacy for their and their family's medical information, including the dedicated school employees who work every day to prepare students for 21st century jobs. That includes Lawton's secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, classroom paraprofessionals and food service workers.

The Legislature and Gov. Jennifer Granholm must ensure the medical privacy and economic security of these public servants and their families -- just like for every other Michigan resident.

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