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Lifesaver machines sought sooner

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Calling the laptop-computer-size machines proven lifesavers, Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn said Sunday he wants defibrillators in place at all public schools, parks and fitness centers by July 2006, three years earlier than a new law requires.

But he acknowledged that the legislative mandate would squeeze cash-strapped cities and school districts, and he said he hopes corporate and private donors would help pay for half the cost.

The announcement kicks off a campaign to "have heart defibrillators as common as fire extinguishers," Quinn said.

More than 7,500 defibrillators are needed to comply with the law signed in August by Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

"There's a miracle technology out there that has worked in places all across this country in saving lives," Quinn said.

"If we act with the kind of zip and energy that people wanted us to, we can make a difference this year for people who need [heart defibrillators] in the physical-fitness places they might visit."

Automatic external defibrillators have become more prevalent in school gyms, office buildings, airports and government facilities in recent years, in part because of lowered costs. A midrange defibrillator costs about \$1,200.

In December, a high school football player in Kenosha collapsed after a weight-lifting session. A trainer used one of the school's two portable defibrillators, applied one shock and revived the 15-year-old.

"We know that every second counts when an individual suffers sudden cardiac arrest," said Joan Beaubaire of the Chicago Chapter of the American Red Cross. "The easy accessibility of the unit can quickly mean the difference between life and death."

In addition to setting up the Heartsaver Trust Fund, by which the public can help schools and cities buy defibrillators, Quinn said he will push for a legislative bill that would add a check-off box on next year's income tax form for donations to the trust fund.

The Colleen O'Sullivan Law, named after a legislative attorney, 30, who died of sudden cardiac arrest while exercising, calls for health clubs, indoor park facilities and school gyms to have at least one defibrillator on site by July 2009.

The law provided no funding for the equipment.

That has left many municipalities and school districts wondering how to pay for the defibrillators, they said.

Illinois cities and school districts would need to spend about \$9 million to buy the 7,500 machines.

"It would be wonderful to have defibrillators in schools at all times," said Thomas Hannigan, Lake County director of the Illinois Association of School Boards. "But it amazes me how one level of power can force another level to pay for something that they're unwilling to fund. It's something that's obviously very nice but should be discretionary."

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