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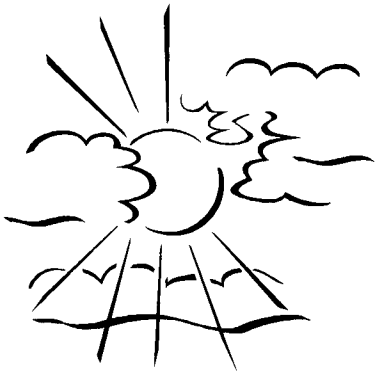

*Important story at this spot

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Monday, August 29, 2005

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Since 1906

REPORT NO. 166 VOLUME 44 FRIDAY, AUGUST 26, 2005

PRESSURE BUILDS AS LEGISLATURE RETURNS

T-minus 35 days and counting. That's how much time remains for Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and the Republican-led Legislature, reconvening this week, to bridge their differences on the 2005-06 budget before that fiscal year begins.

There is no official deadline to complete work on the other major issues pending before state government – reshaping business taxes and investing money into the economy – but they are closely wound into the budget and likely also must be completed before October 1.

After sparse legislative activity since June, both the House and Senate return for a one-day session this week on Wednesday.

The House has scheduled a vote on its business tax plan (See Gongwer Michigan Report, August 25, 2005). It also expects to vote on legislation that would securitize one-quarter of the state's national tobacco settlement payments in exchange for an immediate payment of about $1 billion that would go toward making more capital available for businesses in hopes of diversifying the economy.

The Senate plans to vote on bills designed to keep criminals, especially sexual predators, away from areas frequented by children.

Beyond legislation action, work will ramp up on the budget this week compared to the relatively light negotiations schedule during the summer. Top administration officials and legislative leaders are scheduled to meet Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Matt Resch, spokesperson for House Speaker Craig DeRoche (R-Novi), said top leaders probably will meet "every day" until an agreement is finalized.

The major differences going into the negotiations were on Medicaid, prisons, welfare, K-12 schools and aid to public universities.

If Ms. Granholm and the Legislature cannot agree on a budget before October 1, then they would have to choose between approving a bill that would continue spending at 2004-05 spending levels for a temporary period to keep the government running or shutting down the government. The latter option is extremely remote, having not happened since the infamous "payless paydays" of the late 1950s.

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Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema (R-Wyoming) wants a budget agreement struck next week if possible, said Sikkema spokesperson Ari Adler. Mr. Adler said it is possible the budget could be completed at the Monday meeting.

It would be nice if the other discussions also wrap up, especially the tax ones since they will affect the budget, "but regardless of what happens to the tax plan we have to have a budget. The tax plan does not have an October 1 deadline," Mr. Adler said.

Mr. Adler said negotiations have produced agreements on individual budgets, but "we're at a point where we're not done overall."

Mr. Resch said he was unsure about striking an agreement in the next week, but House leaders have every intention of having a budget signed into law by October 1.

"The speaker has said he is both hopeful and optimistic that we can get these things done by the beginning of the fiscal year," he said. "That's our job as lawmakers."

Greg Bird, spokesperson for the State Budget Office, said the administration is committed to signing a budget into law before the start of the 2006 fiscal year.

"The governor has said all along that she is very hopeful that she can reach a deal," he said. "It's certainly possible that could be done."

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Michigan Report

August 26, 2005

GRANHOLM TOUTS CHILD PROTECTION EFFORTS

Governor Jennifer Granholm applauded legislative work on her proposals for protecting children in the state and highlighted efforts the administration has made in her weekly radio address.

Key in her address was praise for hearings in the House this week on a package of bills that would limit access of sex offenders to children. The bills would restrict sex offenders from participation in activities that center around children, like Little League, as well as prohibiting them, in most cases, from being close to school property.

"We don't always agree in Lansing, but we can agree on common sense ideas to protect our kids, like making sure that sex offenders can be within a certain distance of a school or requiring day care centers to run criminal background checks on their staff," she said.

She also touted the state's efforts to join a national registry of sex offenders as well as legislation creating a "do-not-contact" list to prohibit bulk e-mailers from sending messages to children.

The address is available on the governor's website Monday morning.

Abuse was isolated, day-care assures parents

Monday, August 29, 2005

By John Tunison
The Grand Rapids Press

HOLLAND -- Officials with a Holland day-care operation were trying to ease the concerns of parents Saturday after an employee was arrested for allegedly molesting a 6-year-old girl there.
Police accuse the 21-year-old man, Jason Kortman, of Holland, of inappropriately touching the girl several times during the past four months and as recently as Tuesday.
Kortman was an employee of Lakeshore Little People's Place, a non-profit organization operating three day-care locations in the Holland area and one in East Saugatuck. He was placed on leave as soon as the girl's parents brought the allegations Wednesday and fired on Friday after his arrest.
"Parents and staff are concerned and the board is deeply saddened by this incident," said Laura Keeley, president of the day care's board.
Police say they believe the 6-year-old was the only victim.
The alleged molestation occurred at Lakeshore Little People's Place center at South Side Christian School, 913 Pine Ave.
Holland police Sgt. Keith Mulder said Kortman worked at the center for about two years, while the child had attended for at least a year. Kortman's job wasn't immediately known. However, Mulder described him as "one who worked directly with the kids."
Kortman was arraigned Friday on a charge of second-degree criminal sexual conduct and released on a $5,000 personal recognizance bond. Mulder was not aware of any prior criminal record for Kortman, and officials at Lakeshore Little People's Place said they followed all state rules regarding background checks.
"Licensing was in Friday to make sure we followed all the proper rules, and we did," Keeley said. "There was no indication something like this might happen."
Family members at Kortman's home declined to comment Saturday.
Lakeshore Little People's Place, a ministry of the Holland Deacons Conference, operates out of three Holland-area churches and the South Side Christian School. It serves about 150 children at the four sites, with a mission to provide "quality Christian child care."
Parents with children at the day care where Kortman worked were notified Friday with a letter as soon as administrators learned of his arrest. Keeley said staff was still trying to contact a few parents who were not there Friday.
She said the incident is upsetting to everyone involved with Lakeshore Little People's Place, and she worries about keeping the trust of parents.
"Our parents are understandably concerned, but a number of them have expressed support," she said.
Keeley urges any parents who may be concerned about their children to take them to the Children's Advocacy Center in Holland for an evaluation. However, she said police told her they are confident only one child was assaulted.

Couple reunite after boyfriend charged in son's death

Saturday, August 27, 2005By Ed Ronco

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- A day after her son died of injuries from a beating, Alicia Colar, 23, sat on the front porch of a relative's Southeast Side home, her husband holding her hand and kissing her on the forehead.

She kept tearing up as she remembered the 2-year-old who liked semi-trucks, playing with footballs and dancing as best a toddler can. Armon Colar died Thursday at Spectrum Butterworth Campus, a day after police allege he was beaten by his mother's live-in boyfriend at their apartment in the 1900 block of Bradford Street NE.

On Friday, Alicia Colar, Armon's father, Anthony Colar, and the boy's grandmother, Melvina Hockett, wore bracelets that spelled out Armon's name in beads. They were fashioned by hospital staff.

Grand Rapids police say an autopsy showed Armon died of multiple blunt force trauma. Shortly after Armon was brought to the hospital Wednesday with what doctors said were suspicious injuries, police arrested Alicia Colar's boyfriend, who they said was watching Colar's three children at the time Armon was injured.

Leeclifton Jerome Moore, 17, was arraigned Friday on a felony murder charge. He is being held without bond.

"Don't judge my wife," Anthony Colar said. The couple, separated for months, say they have reconciled and are getting through Armon's death together.

Even before this, parenthood has not been smooth for Alicia Colar.

Her background includes time spent in and out of a foster home and a homeless shelter in 2000 and 2001. She briefly lost custody of her older daughter, Adriyanna Jones, who was 1 at the time. Both Adriyanna and her little sister, Aqwetta Box, appear in numerous court documents citing neglect and concern for the girls' safety.

"I was a kid," said Alicia Colar, who was 17 and 18 during the incidents. "There was no abuse or anything."

The documents show no signs of physical abuse to the girls -- only concern for their living conditions.

Armon's grandmother, Melvina Hockett, said while the family wants justice for the boy's death, they forgive Moore and are trying to move on as they deal with the loss. That includes spending time with Adriyanna and Aqwetta, now 6 and 4, who snuggled up to their mother as she sat on the porch Friday evening.

"We still have a lot to be grateful for," Hockett said.

Across town, an impromptu memorial of teddy bears, balloons and a poster signed by neighbors

sat in front of the door to the apartment where Armon was beaten.

Neighbor Carol Nichols, 66, said she tried repeatedly to call Kent County's Child Protective Services' 24-hour hot line about 10 p.m. Tuesday -- the night before the alleged beating -- to report a man was abusing the boy. Nobody answered, and there was no answering machine, she said.

She said she watched the man swing the boy around by his arms "very swiftly" as the boy screamed. He also marched the boy in the yard for a half-hour and kicked an orange juice container that narrowly missed the child, she said.

She later saw the boy sitting alone in the back yard in his pajamas.

She then called 211, a local resource and referral hot line, where an operator suggested she call 911. She said she didn't call 911 because the abuse didn't appear serious.

The 211 operator eventually connected her to a statewide, toll-free number for CPS. She said the CPS operator suggested she call the Kent County office the next day, which she did.

Missed calls show up on a phone log, said Dick Cunningham, owner of Cunningham Communications, which handles the after-hours calls to the Kent County Child Protective Services hot line. A copy of the company's phone logs shows three calls received after 10 p.m. Tuesday, and nothing missed.

Nichols said she called two numbers -- the first of which would have connected to Cunningham's switchboard.

The second number -- 336-3244 -- is listed in the SBC 2005 phone book as "Child Abuse &Neglect -- Kent County -- Evenings Weekends &Holidays," but is out of service.

Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for Michigan's Department of Human Services, said officials will take "prompt action" with SBC to correct the directories.

Sorbet said people who encounter problems reaching Child Protective Services should call 911 to report abuse.

- Press staff writer Ken Kolker contributed to this story.

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Father Accused Of Performing Sex Acts With Daughters

Police Collect Videotape As Evidence

POSTED: 6:46 pm EDT August 26, 2005

DEARBORN HEIGHTS, Mich. -- A Dearborn Heights man has been accused of performing sex acts on his three daughters, Local 4 reported.

The 44-year-old was arrested Thursday night after returning home from a business trip.

He was arraigned on charges including four counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct, two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct and one count of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct.

According to court documents obtained by Local 4, the alleged sex acts took place in two separate homes, including the home where the family currently lives. The alleged incidents started in 2002 when at least one of his daughters was under the age of 13 and the other two were between the ages of 13 and 16.

All three daughters are named as plaintiffs in the criminal case, the station reported.

The father is being held at Wayne County Jail on a $250,000 bond.

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Money is returning to help sex victims

Oakland County likely to OK $30,000

August 29, 2005

BY KATHLEEN GRAY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Victims of sexual assault are expected to continue having a resource for counseling and testing as a result of a $30,000 grant from Oakland County.

HAVEN, a counseling center and shelter for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, has been operating since 2001 at a Royal Oak location that is kept secret for security reasons.

A HAVEN program provides forensic nurses and counselors to help gather evidence from rape victims and possible assault victims in a setting that is much more comforting than a hospital emergency room.

Oakland County gave HAVEN a grant in 2001 to help set up the assault response program, but had declined to offer more financial support, despite repeated requests from Democratic members of the Board of County Commissioners.

"There were some strained relationships between the former leadership of the shelter and some members of the commission," said Commissioner David Woodward, D-Royal Oak.

In addition, the HAVEN situation came up in the 2004 election between Woodward and then-incumbent Republican Peter Webster, who declined to support the program.

Webster lost, and some Republicans on the board took notice when Woodward resurrected the request for HAVEN during hearings this year.

The current funding request sailed through three county committees last week, and the full board is expected to approve the grant Thursday.

Board chairman Bill Bullard, R-Highland Township, visited HAVEN and said the program is worthy.

He praised the comfortable setting, compared with the chaos of an emergency room where examinations of rape victims can be interrupted when other trauma patients arrive.

Sexual assault victims are referred to HAVEN by police, hospitals and family physicians. Since the program began, it has helped 530 women, children and men from across Oakland County, said Beth Morrison, president and chief executive officer of HAVEN.

People involved with the program also testify in court. In the program's first two years, there was a 100% conviction rate for its cases that went to court, said Morrison.

HAVEN has been operating the program primarily with contributions to cover its $200,000 annual cost, but much of that money has dried up, said Morrison. The county is to provide up to $30,000. Each forensic exam costs $200.

"The program has never been fully funded, so we'll still have to aggressively fund-raise," she said. "I'm just grateful that it went through this time. The commissioners seem so supportive and understand the public safety benefit that this program provides."

If you are the victim of domestic violence or sexual assault, call HAVEN any time at 877-922-1274. Contact KATHLEEN GRAY at 313-223-4407 or gray@freepress.com.

Michigan targets Medicaid thieves

Citizens who help crack Medicaid theft cases could get millions of dollars under a proposed law.

By Sharon Terlep / The Detroit News

Sunday, August 28, 2005

Michigan is struggling to fight fraud that drains as much as $750 million a year from the state's Medicaid program -- the last resort for health care for 1.5 million poor residents.

The state's health care fraud unit, a team of 36 lawyers, investigators and experts, recovers only a sliver of what's stolen each year through phony claims for everything from dental work that's never performed to medical equipment that's never delivered.

The cheating diverts money from other state priorities, such as roads and schools, while driving up costs for doctors and insurance companies that ultimately are passed on to consumers.

With the problem expected to worsen as the health care system grows and technology makes it easier to carry out crimes, Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox is intensifying efforts to weed out fraud.

He's looking to join national lawsuits against sham operations and enlist the public in tracking down Medicaid crooks.

Michigan's health care fraud unit last year recovered $14 million -- a record, but still a fraction of what's being taken.

In the last several months in Metro Detroit alone, three companies have been charged with stealing more than $1 million through false claims for services, prescription drugs and dental care.

"People see that there's a lot of money in health care, and a whole lot of people want to prey on that system," Cox said. "We have to go after the bigger cases, to be the big stick that whacks people and deters others."

The focus on fraud comes as Michigan faces losing more than $300 million annually in federal Medicaid funds under cost-saving recommendations sent by President Bush to Congress this month.

Michigan spends $7.5 billion annually on Medicaid, representing one-fourth of the state's $30 billion annual budget.

In 2003, the most recent figures available, individual states collectively recovered $270 million in stolen Medicaid money, up from $148 million in 2000.

The federal government, which funds Medicaid programs jointly with states, recovered $43 million in 2003, up from $27 million in 2000.

It is unclear exactly how much money is stolen. Cox cites national statistics, which estimate that every state loses 3 percent to 10 percent of its Medicaid budget to fraud -- or about $225 million to $750 million in Michigan.

But Michigan Medicaid Director Paul Reinhart said the actual impact on state coffers is far less.

According to Reinhart, about $1.6 billion of the state's Medicaid budget is susceptible to fraud. The remaining $5.9 billion is dished out to managed care organizations, nursing homes and other

operations that charge the state a fixed rate for services. If money is stolen, those companies lose, not the state.

Reinhart said paying companies to administer Medicaid care has helped the state avoid losing millions of dollars to cheaters.

"We have addressed this program by organizing it in a way to reduce this potential for fraud," he said.

Defenses against fraud

Fraud happens when health providers, often sham companies, make money by overbilling Medicaid for services, charging for services or products they never provide or charging for unnecessary procedures.

Filing a false Medicaid claim is a four-year felony and carries a maximum $50,000 fine.

Cases can be nearly impossible for an outsider to catch, however. A common scheme, for example, is to bill a patient for dental work, such as additional fillings, that isn't needed and is never performed. Even the patient isn't aware he or she never received the care for which Medicaid was charged.

Regular citizens often are the best defense against fraud, triggering more than two-thirds of fraud investigations last year in Michigan. Employees who either know about or take part in scams are a key source for investigators.

That's why Cox is pushing legislation that would award people who successfully sue thieving health care providers for Medicaid fraud at least 15 percent of the settlement plus attorney fees. The measure is being considered in the state House of Representatives.

More than a dozen lawmakers, Democrat and Republican, support the legislation. Gov. Jennifer Granholm hasn't taken a position. Similar laws have hit roadblocks in other states, in part because the powerful medical lobby generally opposes them.

States such as Florida and Texas, which have whistleblower laws similar to what's being proposed in Michigan, recoup three to four times what Michigan currently recovers from Medicaid cheats. Fifteen states and some major cities have such laws, according to the False Claims Act Legal Center.

In Florida, a Miami hospital agreed to pay $16.8 million to settle a whistleblower suit charging that it double-billed Medicaid; the former employee who filed the case will collect about $1.4 million.

"Without those awards, you're not going to get those people going to authorities," said James Moorman, president of Washington, D.C.-based Taxpayers Against Fraud. "There aren't very many ways to fight fraud, and this turns out to be a very good one."

Industry resists moves

But the medical community is wary of the whistleblowers concept.

Paying people to go after medical providers encourages vendetta-seeking workers and rival doctors, while adding one more burden on medical professionals already struggling with Medicaid and Medicare cuts and rising malpractice insurance rates, said Alan Mindlin, president of the Michigan State Medical Society, a Lansing-based group that represents physicians statewide.

Since people who sue providers for Medicaid fraud would be protected under the law, there would be no consequence for frivolous lawsuits, he said. The attorney general's office, not civil attorneys, should bear the responsibility for going after swindlers.

"You're guilty until proven otherwise under this," Mindlin said. "If a suit is meritorious and someone has committed fraud, why can't the attorney general pursue it?"

Cox also wants Michigan to join national cases against major companies, such as a lawsuit filed last week in California, in which the attorney general sued 39 drug makers, accusing them of charging the state as much as 10 times more than others.

Over decades, the focus of fraud enforcement efforts has shifted from hospitals to nursing homes to private practitioners. In recent years, more pharmaceutical companies have been hit with sweeping fraud charges resulting in settlements worth hundreds of millions.

Tight budgets limit options

Michigan can't afford to invest in the resources it would take to catch substantially more fraud, Cox said. His health care fraud unit has a $3.3 million budget -- barely $100,000 more than five years ago -- and there's one fewer employee than in 2000.

"We don't want to grow for the sake of growth," Cox said.

In recent months, his office has charged a Howell physician's assistant with forging a prescription and passing the cost onto Medicaid via a false claim. An Ann Arbor home care company was accused of filing nearly $900,000 in false mileage and service charges. And a Lansing dentist was charged with filing 23 false claims through a dental program for poor children.

"With Medicaid, it's so easy to buffalo auditors and cover up details," said Moorman of the taxpayers group. "The government is just too busy to react to all the tips that come in."

You can reach Sharon Terlep at (313) 223-4686 or sterlep@detnews.com.

Fighting fraud

Michigan's Health Care Fraud Division has stepped up efforts to receive money lost through Medicaid fraud.

Year	Funds collected	Number of complaints
2000	$2.0M	1,211
2001	$1.5M	1,166
2002	$4.4M	1,392
2003	$6.0M	1,269
2004	$14.2M	1,174
2005*	$5.5M	700

*Through July

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report for fiscal year 2003, Michigan Attorney General

Where Michigan ranks among states in money recovered through Medicaid fraud cases:

New Jersey	$42M
California	$39M
Texas	$31M
New York	$24M
Florida	$21M
Virginia	$16M
North Carolina	$14M
Michigan	$7M
Ohio	$5M
Massachusetts	$4M

The Detroit News

Donker's unit targets Medicaid theft

The Associated Press
Midland Daily News 08/29/2005

LANSING – A state team made up of 36 lawyers, investigators and experts is working to fight fraud that drains millions of dollars each year from the state's Medicaid program.

The health care fraud unit recovers only a fraction of what's stolen each year through phony claims to Medicaid, a joint state-federal program that covers health care costs for the poor. Former Midland County Prosecutor Norm Donker works in Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox's office as first assistant in the health care fraud division. The Daily News was not able to interview Donker this morning.

Cox is intensifying efforts to weed out fraud. He is looking to join national lawsuits against sham operations and enlist the public in tracking down Medicaid crooks.

Last year, the fraud unit recovered $14 million. In recent months, several companies in Michigan have been charged with stealing through false claims for services, prescription drugs and dental care.

"People see that there's a lot of money in health care, and a whole lot of people want to prey on that system," Cox said. "We have to go after the bigger cases, to be the big stick that whacks people and deters others."

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It is unclear exactly how much money is lost to fraud. National statistics cited by Cox estimate that every state loses 3 percent to 10 percent of its Medicaid budget to fraud – or about $225 million to $750 million in Michigan.

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"We have addressed this program by organizing it in a way to reduce this potential for fraud," he said.

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Columnists

LOCAL COMMENT: Medicaid cuts will rebound on everyone

August 29, 2005

BY SPENCER JOHNSON

On the same day leaders of the state House of Representatives announced this summer another round of deep cuts to health care for Michigan Medicaid patients, a Families USA report issued in Washington offered this conclusion:

Health insurance premiums for the average Michigan family will increase $730 this year to cover the costs of providing medical care for the uninsured.

In other words, Michigan residents who lack health care coverage are still getting sick, and someone else in Michigan is paying for their care. That "someone" is those of us who have health care insurance and Michigan employers. Combined, we will pay more than $1.1 billion this year and $1.5 billion by 2010 to pay the health care bills of Michigan's uninsured, the Families USA report concludes.

It would be unwise, then, for our elected leaders to increase purposely the number of Michigan residents without health care insurance, or to pare the benefits of people who have coverage. But what have our elected leaders in Lansing done with the Medicaid budget in recent years?

Since 1999, they have slashed Medicaid health care by more than $540 million. During this same time period, Michigan's Medicaid caseload has skyrocketed to a record high 1.5 million people. Today, one in seven Michigan residents -- virtually all of them children, pregnant women, the elderly and disabled -- depend on Medicaid for their medical care. In addition, the number of Michigan people without health care insurance has increased to about 1.1 million.

In 2002, the Legislature passed a tax on hospitals to leverage more federal funds. For every $1 Michigan spends on Medicaid, the federal government sends an additional $1.31 to the state.

Despite the massive Medicaid cuts and skyrocketing Medicaid caseloads of recent years, the 2006 state budgets proposed by the governor and Legislature cut Medicaid health care funding again. Total cuts range from $125 million in the governor's budget plan, to more

than $200 million in the budget unveiled by the House.

In addition to shifting higher health care costs to Michigan employers and insured residents, the depth and breadth of the fiscal year 2006 Medicaid cuts proposed by the House and Senate would cause suffering to tens of thousands of Michigan's most vulnerable and fragile residents.

Budget officials for the state House, Senate and governor now estimate that the state general fund will collect about $79 million more than expected in the current fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, and roughly $78 million more in FY 2006, which starts Oct. 1. These revenues should go to health care to cushion the blow of massive Medicaid budget cuts from recent years and to protect thousands of health care jobs and care for thousands of Michigan's neediest citizens.

Understand that the face of Medicaid in Michigan today is, by and large, the face of our grandparents. Elderly and disabled Michigan residents account for 70% of total Medicaid health care spending, mostly for long-term care and prescription drugs. In terms of total patients served, the face of Medicaid today is mostly children and their moms. Medicaid finances about 33 of every 100 births in Michigan.

In addition, Medicaid is one reason health care is Michigan's top private sector employer, providing more than 472,300 direct jobs and 254,340 indirect jobs that pump $29.8 billion a year in wages and salaries into the state's economy. Health care is projected to generate more than 100,000 new jobs in Michigan in the next decade, as the state's population lives longer and needs more health care services.

According to a recent study by Michigan State University researchers, a $100-million cut in Medicaid spending would result in more than 6,300 Michigan residents losing their jobs. So the cuts proposed by the House could cost 12,600 Michigan health care jobs.

Now is precisely the wrong time to reduce Medicaid spending. Instead, the state must commit, over the long term, to paying its fair share for health care to protect children and the elderly, to protect thousands of good jobs, and to stop shifting the costs of government underfunding to employers and the insured.

SPENCER JOHNSON is president of the Michigan Health and Hospital Association. Write to him in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 600 W. Fort St., Detroit, MI 48226.

Human Services agency cited by feds

HOMETOWN HEADLINES

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, August 29, 2005

By Ron Fonger rfonger@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6317

GENESEE COUNTY

The Genesee County Department of Human Services has been honored for its administration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service's Food Stamp Program.
Genesee was one of six counties in Michigan recognized for accuracy in calculating benefits, according to a news release.
The agency was formerly known as the Family Independence Agency.

Ron Fonger

Column: They're all looking for good news in jobs numbers

Sunday, August 28, 2005

By Peter Luke

Come the third week of every month, Gov. Jennifer Granholm's political advisers must feel like hiding under their desks.

That's when her Department of Labor and Economic Growth releases the previous month's job tallies. The July payroll employment numbers, released Aug. 17, were down a particularly grim 17,000 workers.

Republicans carefully monitor the release of those numbers as well. When they're bad, like last month's, they issue press releases bearing headlines like: "The Unemployment Governor."

Dick DeVos of Ada, Granholm's likely Republican challenger, said last week the state is struggling because of the governor's "failed agenda." Republicans who have controlled the Legislature for nearly a decade apparently share none of the responsibility.

Polls show that Granholm's own job approval ratings have been generally positive, even though voters by a wide margin believe Michigan is on the wrong track. Republicans have to persuade voters that she's the reason Michigan leads the nation in unemployment.

But if Democrats were to suggest it's the Republicans' fault -- "The Unemployment House Speaker" (Craig DeRoche, R-Novi) or "The Unemployment Senate Majority Leader" (Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming) -- it wouldn't be any more fair or accurate.

The structural economic change besetting Michigan predates all three political leaders.

According to a recent Senate Fiscal Agency analysis of 10 years of economic data, automobile and light truck production in Michigan dropped from 3.4 million units in 1994 to 2.6 million units in 2004.

In 1994, Michigan workers assembled nearly 23 percent of all the cars and trucks produced in this country. Ten years later, it was 15 percent. During that same period manufacturing employment, as a percentage of total Michigan employment, dropped from 20 percent to 16 percent.

The Big Three's market share is declining and more cars and trucks are being built by BMW, Honda and Toyota in states other than Michigan.

So what to do?

Granholm and Republicans have been talking about a business tax plan for months. The House GOP may vote this week on its own "Get Michigan Working" plan in which the full measure of tax relief is delayed until 2009. "Get Michigan Working!" ...um, three years from now.

Republicans used to be serious about prescribing tax cuts for economic prosperity, like the income and business tax cuts of 1999, which were followed by the loss of more than 300,000 Michigan jobs.

The House GOP tax plan is less dramatic than the one proposed by Granholm back in January. Doing more would require busting the state budget or following Granholm's formula of raising other revenue by adjusting the tax code, which Republicans are loath to do.

There is more bipartisan agreement on cobbling together $1 billion through the sale of tobacco-lawsuit settlement proceeds for life sciences research designed to diversify Michigan's economy.

All that does is maintain a commitment to high technology investment made by the state six years ago.

Politicians up for election next year would like to give voters the impression that they are working to cure Michigan's economic ills, even if those ills are beyond their curative powers. Kind of like hiring more gas pump inspectors as an answer to soaring gas prices. Toyota is building a new plant not in Michigan, but in union-rich Ontario because Canada, not Toyota, will pay for employee health care.

Paid-for tax cuts and high-tech investment can do some good on the margins but can't buttress the economic and political punishment mass auto industry firings, layoffs and plant closings would mete out.

The prospects for that are mixed. Auto analysts say cost cutting is inevitable, but auto executives always seem to find a way of putting it off.

Their staff economists indicate Granholm and lawmakers are optimistic. While predicting modest job growth next year, this month they put out a budget estimate that forecasts the biggest growth in personal income since the boom years of the 1990s.

Here's hoping their optimism is more than wishful thinking about their own near-term job security.

Feedback from detnews.com

Does Granholm deserve blame for Michigan's jobless rate?

From: Thomas Wentworth
City: Troy

Jennifer Granholm has done nothing as governor of Michigan except preside over outrageous increases in traffic fines (check out the fines added by the state for no proof of insurance, no operators license, expired license, getting your tabs late, etc.). This state is sinking fast ... fat cat overpaid state legislators, sky high gas prices, monster unemployment, loss of major manufacturing jobs, and no plans except big talk at Mackinac about what to do.

From: P. Boyce
City: Troy

Jenny deserves much of the blame. I was very disappointed in her making the Single Business Tax "revenue neutral," instead of being bold and just eliminating the tax altogether. I am also disappointed that she emphasizes attracting foreign investment instead of encouraging and having programs in place for more Michigan citizens to become entrepreneurs. We, as Michiganders, need to shop around more business plans, instead of resumes!

From: Dick Brown
City: South Branch

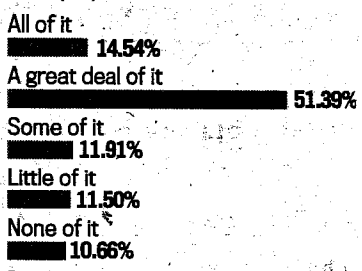
I can't believe that anyone would blame the present governor for the shape that we are in. First we had Engler. He ran the state so far in debt that we'll never get out, and then we got NAFTA and now Bush and Iraq. The country is trillions of dollars in debt and going deeper every day because of Iraq. Now Bush wants to cut benefits to the poorest of us because of this huge debt. Before you blame the governor for the shape that we're in, check back to the shape that the state was in when she took office, and how much support she has gotten from Washington.

From: E. Quinlan
City: Warren

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's a woman in a macho macho land. Nothing she could have done will change the minds of the pea-brains who can't stand to see a woman in government office. Granholm tried to be a moderate. Actually, this was a noble intent on her part in light of the partisan bickering that goes on in government circles.

CyberSurvey

How much of the blame does Gov. Granholm deserve for Michigan's unemployment rate?



Based on an unscientific poll of 720 readers of detnews.com

The Detroit News

From: Jen McGregor
City: Howell

I can't believe Granholm spends so much time on Michigan "Cool Cities." I spent nine months unemployed. Trust me ... no city is "cool" until it has a good job market. Rather than wasting taxpayer dollars on "cool cities" ... put the tax dollars into creating jobs, bringing business into the state, lowering taxes for employers and helping the lower-class workers find assistance to further their education.

From: Jim Adams, J.D.
City: Carleton

Clueless Jenny and the Democrats have no viable ideas for private-sector job growth because all the left-wingers ever try is PUBLIC-sector job "creation" through increased taxation. Raising taxes on anyone won't create private-sector jobs: Job growth has to come from a combination of lower health care costs, better vocational training and education in math and science, fewer governmental regulations of business, and most of all, Americans buying products that are made in the USA by American companies.

From: Tony Stark
City: Howell

While I am a Republican and would support someone like Candace Miller or Joe Schwarz for governor, I don't think you can blame much of this on Granholm. Frankly, she's already cut more government her first term than John Engler did in his last! And what is the alternative to Jennifer Granholm? Unfortunately, not a rational Republican like Miller or Schwarz, but a zealot-like, self-absorbed Dick DeVos!

Should Michigan become right-to-work state?

Beware attack on unions

Frank Beckmann's Aug. 12 column, "Turning Michigan into right-to-work state promises to create more jobs than overseas trip," contains many misleading statements. First, under federal law, nobody can be forced to join a union before going to work. The so-called "right-to-work" law is a loophole in the National Labor Relations Act that allows a state to enact a law prohibiting employers from negotiating a union security clause into a collective bargaining contract with the union that represents their employees.

A union security clause is how dues are collected from the workers who receive the benefits of a collective bargaining agreement. In most states, private-sector management and labor are free to make any agreement about how dues are collected. This is outlawed by the "right-to-work" states. Beckmann, the governor and the state should not make this choice for workers. This is a pure and simple attack on unions.

PAUL LEVASSEUR
Pinconning

Put union laws on table

I could not agree with Frank Beckmann more on the right-to-work issue in Michigan. Everything needs to be on the table to get this state back on the move again.

I grew up in a union home. I worked in a union trade for many years. My father always said: The union needs the company, and the company needs the union. They must work together for the common good of the workers. However, no matter how hard the union and the company work together, when government works against them both, nothing good can happen.

DOUG CAMPBELL
Quincy

Don't restrict worker rights

I disagree with Frank Beckmann's Aug. 12 column. Right-to-work laws are a bad deal for workers because they restrict workers' rights to union representation and lower the wages of all workers. With no unions to represent them, workers cannot bargain for better wages and benefits.

JOHN WOLF
Howell

Union states more expensive

In seeking to refute Frank Beckmann's Aug. 12 column urging Michigan elected officials to consider adoption of a state right-to-work law, state AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney concedes that job and real income growth are much faster in right-to-work states than in non-right-to-work states. Nevertheless, Gaffney claims enacting a Michigan right-to-work law would be bad for the economy ("Right to work results in lower pay, benefits," Aug. 16).

Unfortunately, his attempted rebuttal ignores several key facts. I'll focus here on just one: On average, the cost of living is substantially lower in the 22 right-to-work states. An interstate cost-of-living index created by statistician F. Howard Nelson shows that pre-tax living expenses for employees in non-right-to-work states are on average 15 percent higher than they are for employees in right-to-work states. As a staffer for the American Federation of Teachers' research department, Nelson can hardly be accused of harboring an anti-union bias.

MARK A. MIX
President
National Right to Work
Springfield, Va.

Right-to-work's lower pay

The right-to-work laws turn into the "right to work for less pay." It is no secret that passing laws under this guise of workers' rights actually hurts the workers it purports to help. As an electrician in Michigan, I am afforded wages that are relevant to the demanding work, and oftentimes dangerous work, I do. My wages do not allow me to drive pricey sports cars; rather, they allow me to raise my family of four, with my wife being able to stay home and be with our children to instill the family values we were raised with.

It would hurt my career, my family and all workers in Michigan to give into the big business attitude that workers receiving lower wages is better for the local economy.

DEREK PENNINGTON
Livonia

Leaders make bad choices

Finally The News has a commentator who does not pull his punches as do so many of the "support the liberal agenda at all costs" journalists. Bravo.

Frank Beckmann has made the accurate case that like the steel industry, Amtrak and Northwest Airlines, the automotive industry and easy-spending governments have found themselves in quicksand up to their knees. With few opportunities for do-overs anymore, the collective burdens of bad decision-making by management will be exacting a heavy toll. While we can see their pain, there should be no public burden to resolve bad choices. Leadership sometimes can be hard, and people in those positions should not continue to duck.

JIM NOWKA
Northville

Study effects of labor costs

Frank Beckman's column is right on. The governor should be studying why Japanese auto companies locate in other states instead of proposing to borrow money to subsidize minor ventures. Labor costs may well be one of the factors. Government may be a big factor, too.

At least we should make an unbiased effort to understand why we are not desirable before we start proposing solutions.

ALBERT FOSTER
Dearborn

Published August 29, 2005

MI Works collapse may never be solved
Agency chief: Inquiries differ on reason, blame

By Stacey Range
Lansing State Journal

Preliminary reports indicate everything from "an act of God to the nails used" could have caused the Capital Area Michigan Works building to collapse, but an exact determination might never be known, the job agency's chief said.

Although there are at least five separate investigations into the June 25 implosion, CEO Doug Stites said he doesn't think any will offer a valid explanation on why the four-year-old building his agency leased caved in on a calm, sunny morning.

"I am curious, but I don't have an expectation I'll ever get the truth," Stites said.

The reasons: too much finger pointing by parties who'll likely end up battling it out in court.

"This is all about money now," Stites said.

Adding to the confusion is that the city - citing safety reasons - made workers tear down the collapsed center section before inspectors could get in to survey the damage.

"They destroyed the evidence," said East Lansing architect Peter Holz, who designed the building near the corner of Cedar Street and Mt. Hope Avenue.

The job placement and training agency is temporarily working out of the Walter French Academy building next door.

Christine Segerlind, manager of Lansing's building safety office, said the structure was partially collapsed and unsafe to enter.

Stites, who was standing outside the building about an hour after its collapse, agreed.

"The front wall was bending under the pressure," Stites said. "It was a prudent decision."

Another problem Stites noted is that although there are several investigations, none is being done by an independent party. The city is not investigating, saying it is a private building.

Charlie Curtis, assistant chief of the state's building division, said Lansing is not obligated to investigate the collapse but that he was surprised the city wasn't anyway.

"We're supposed to protect the public, and the public goes into private buildings, as well," Curtis said.

Multiple investigations

Forensic engineers representing various and competing interests are investigating the June 25 collapse of the Capital Area Michigan Works building in Lansing. The parties investigating include:

- Eyde Co.: The building's owner
- Travelers Insurance: Policyholder for Eyde Co.
- Auto-Owners Insurance: Policyholder for Capital Area Michigan Works and architect Peter Holz
- Pennsylvania Lumbermen's Mutual Insurance Co.: Policyholder for Heart Truss & Engineering of Lansing

Segerlind said the task of determining a cause of the collapse falls to the Eyde Co., the building's owners. Mark Clouse, general counsel and spokesman for the Eyde Co., did not return calls for comment.

The Eyde Co. has hired Ledy Design Group of Lansing to investigate the cause. Other investigations are being done by Travelers Insurance, which holds the policy on the building, and Auto-Owners Insurance, the policy holder for Capitol Area Michigan Works and Holz, the architect.

Speculation and blame

Stites said preliminary reports indicate a variety of factors could have played a role in the collapse.

But he said: "It's all speculation, and each engineer is working for someone with a motive to blame it on someone else."

The reports, he said, vary as to whether the flaw lay in the design, materials or construction.

"I've talked to 12 different engineers, and each has about three different opinions," Stites said.

He added that the initial reports blame "everything from an act of God to the nails used to the truss design to how the walls were built. No one really knows."

The potential for legal action is keeping most parties mum.

Ginny McKay, spokeswoman for Auto-Owners Insurance, said she couldn't discuss the investigations while the claims remain open.

Curt Schaberg, whose company designed and built the trusses that held the roof of the building, declined to comment for this story. Pennsylvania Lumbermen's Mutual Insurance Co., which holds the policy for Heart Truss & Engineering of Lansing, also is investigating but did not return calls seeking comment.

Holz, of Blackwood Design, said a forensic engineering company hired by Auto-Owners has cleared him of liability.

But he said engineers told him they could never be sure.

"There was no good way to differentiate between what was a failure and what was demolition," Holz said.

All new design

Stites, who had hundreds of workers and clients in the building the day before the collapse, is the only party who had more to lose than money and reputation. Yet, Stites said he won't be terribly upset if he never knows a cause.

That's because no one was hurt in the collapse and the reconstructed center section will be different, he said.

The center section is being designed as a two-story with a flat roof instead of the single-story with extreme vaulted ceiling. Stites said he requested the new design because the center already was out of space, not because of any design flaw. The rebuilt center is supposed to be open in January.

"If the building was going to be the same, I would be concerned," Stites said. "But this is a totally different building. I have to trust it will stand for a long time."

Contact Stacey Range at 377-1157 or srange@lsj.com.

Macomb County targets people scamming seniors

August 27, 2005

BY NATE TRELA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The stranger who appeared at Violet Zivkovich's doorstep made her a fine offer, saying he'd trim the dead branches from her trees, free of charge. But the 88-year-old Warren woman was leery. She had reason to be.

Once inside her house, the guy demanded money, then started shoving her around. Fortunately, a neighbor -- who had seen the man's truck outside -- called police, who arrived as Zivkovich was yelling for help.

Perhaps just as important, the man is behind bars, one of the success stories of a new unit in the Macomb County Prosecutor's Office, which authorities say is unique in the state.

Focusing solely on crimes against seniors, the unit has a perfect conviction rate in 77 cases in its first seven months -- including that of Internet lothario Robert Pugh, who sweet-talked widows and divorcees out of more than $200,000 before he was caught.

While there is little data suggesting that crimes against seniors are on the rise nationally, law enforcement officials say more attention needs to be paid to make sure older, more-vulnerable citizens are protected.

Macomb County Prosecutor Eric J. Smith decided to devote two prosecutors to a full-time senior-crime unit because older people in the county have become increasingly vocal about their need for protection and aid after they are victimized.

While the state Attorney General's Office has a similar unit, Macomb's is believed to be the only team of its kind at the county level in Michigan.

The unit has targeted roving scam artists -- like the one who came to Zivkovich's house -- as well as cons who target the same victim repeatedly and caretakers who abuse the seniors they're supposed to be helping.

Smith says all 77 cases the unit closed in its first seven months ended with convictions. "It sounds like we're doing something right to me," he said.

Protecting seniors

Crisscrossing the county while campaigning last year, Smith heard frequently from seniors and patterns began to emerge. Wondering whether law enforcement officials and the courts were seeing the similarities, he promised people he'd make the creation of a senior-crime unit his first act if elected.

Now, every crime committed in the county against a senior is sent to one of two prosecutors who follow the case from the initial arraignment to the final verdict.

More often than not, the unit deals with people tricked out of money or property. According to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 90% of the crimes committed against people 65 or older are property crimes.

Regardless of the crime, however, Smith has pledged that people who victimize seniors will not get plea deals.

John Latella, the assistant prosecutor who serves as the Macomb unit's chief, said funneling all crimes against seniors to a small team makes it easier to identify trends and get the word out about repeated scams.
Recently, he authorized six warrants against a man who has allegedly been offering to paint seniors' homes in Chesterfield and Macomb townships, then running off with their deposit money.
In previous years, cases in different communities would have gone to different prosecutors who might never connect the dots.
"These things don't slip through the cracks now," he said.
The unit's biggest case to date has involved Pugh, a Harrison Township man who was out on bond on an extortion case when he started wooing older widows and divorcees through an online dating site. On Wednesday, he was sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.
Latella said more challenging cases are on tap for the unit. Most notably, he'll be trying the case of a 52-year-old man who Latella says convinced an 87-year-old Warren woman to hire him as a live-in nurse in 2003.
The woman ended up giving Pren Karaqi, an undocumented immigrant from Kosovo, roughly $200,000 -- much of which was transferred to a Swiss bank account -- and changing her will to bequeath her home to him, prosecutors say.
Smith said Karaqi did little more than live in the home, but the victim didn't realize something was wrong until her family raised concerns.
Karaqi fled the area, but was arrested July 2 in Maine trying to re-enter the United States from Canada. He faces a preliminary exam Thursday in 37th District Court in Warren.

Help for victims

It's not all about big scams, however. Small-time con artists, like Frank Delmaro, 29, of Dearborn, who targeted Zivkovich, get as much attention, Latella said.
Zivkovich, who said she had never been the victim of a crime until Delmaro came to her door in March, said prosecutors and police helped her through an extremely difficult time.
Delmaro told her if she moved the truck in her driveway, he'd trim her trees, no charge.
Zivkovich said she couldn't move the truck -- only her son, Eli, could -- but she couldn't get the man to leave. So she allowed him to come in the house, telling him to call her son. Her hope was her son could get rid of him.
But Delmaro only pretended to call her son, saying he got a busy signal. He then asked Zivkovich to change a $100 bill. When she told him she had no money and he had to leave, the man demanded money.
A neighbor, who had noticed Delmaro's truck driving up and down the street for a day and a half, saw the truck in Zivkovich's driveway and called police, prosecutors said.
"I never went through anything like that in my whole life," Zivkovich said.
As the case progressed, she said, staff from the prosecutor's office worked with her every step of the way. Delmaro pleaded guilty to second-degree home invasion and was sentenced to a year in jail and three years of probation.
The prosecutor's office is assisted by the Macomb County Senior Citizen Services Department, which helps victims with issues outside the courtroom that go along with being a victim of crime.
They also help people recognize that in some cases, it may not be in their best interest to continue living alone -- at least not for awhile.

"We might be able to recognize that a senior who has been victimized might need housing or counseling. We know what resources we can provide for them," said Karen Bisdorf, interim director of the Senior Citizen Services Department.

Joanne Williams, 70, of Clinton Township learned about the unit at a senior safety conference recently and said that, although she hasn't been a crime victim, she hoped prosecutors understand that older people can be a little different.

"They'll hopefully be a little more patient with us," she said with a laugh.

Contact NATE TRELA at 586-469-8087 or trela@freepress.com

How to stay safe

- Check out unsolicited offers with consumer protection agencies.
- Stay active and connected with friends and family.
- Review bank and credit card statements each month.

Additional tips below.

Knowledge is power

Here are ways seniors can protect themselves from crime:

Identity theft

- Never give out Social Security, driver's license or account numbers unless you know the organization or person with whom you're dealing. Closely guard any documents that have this information, and shred them before throwing them away.
- Notify your bank and credit card companies before moving to a new home or care facility.
- Review your bank and credit card statements each month and your credit report each year. You can get a free credit report every 12 months by calling 877-322-8228.

Telemarketing fraud

- Never give out a credit card, Social Security or bank account number or buy something over the phone to claim a prize.
- Check out a charity before you donate.
- Don't invest money with an unknown caller who insists you immediately make up your mind.

Door-to-door scams

- Roofers, repairmen and investors typically don't contact you by phone or show up at your door. Check out unsolicited offers with the Better Business Bureau, local consumer protection agencies, the county prosecutor's office or the state Attorney General's Office.
- Do not make change for someone who comes to your door.

Elder abuse and neglect

- Create a power of attorney or a living will to address health care decisions in advance. Make sure someone you trust has looked over any documents before you sign them.
- Stay active and connected with friends and family.
- If you have a paid or family caregiver, you have the right to voice your preferences and concerns. If you live in a nursing home or board and care home and are having problems, call the state's Long Term Care Ombudsman at 866-485-9393.

- Sources: Macomb County Prosecutor's Office, National Center on Elder Abuse, Free Press research

Getting by

Adult day care gives relatives, friends time for other tasks

■ Clients receive physical, occupational and speech therapy. Nurses on staff check for medications.

By Hillary Chura
New York Times

Audrey Jennings has seen her social life cut in half since minor cognitive impairment and balance problems were diagnosed three years ago in her husband, Ken. It's not just the time she spends caring for him at their new condominium in Annapolis, Md., she says, but his diminished conversational skills that forced them to forgo playing bridge, dining out and mixing with friends.

But Jennings, 68, says she has found a lifeline: an adult day program, sometimes called adult day care, that provides her the opportunity for outside social interaction while her husband is being supervised in a safe environment.

The Jennings still go to museums and concerts occasionally, she says, but twice a week, Ken Jennings, 69, attends his day program. For $28 a day, while he is having lunch and doing word jumbles, she is maintaining the household, playing bridge and visiting with friends. "It made my life bearable," Audrey Jennings said. "For caregivers, it's the only way. I can do things with my lady friends. It gave me my life back."

An estimated 25 percent of American households care for an aging friend or relative, the National Adult Day Services Association and other advocacy groups say. That number is expected to grow as elderly Americans increasingly become infirm and baby boomers face their own health crises.

A little-known step between senior centers and nursing homes, these small adult day programs are thought to help about 150,000 Americans receive social, intellectual and physical stimulation while living at home.

Costs average $56 a day, according to a 2002 study financed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and conducted by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine. That compares with $179 a day for a private room in a nursing home, $77 a day for a private room in an assisted-living facility and $149 a day for eight hours of a home health aide, according to a separate study from Genworth Financial, which sells long-term-care and other insurance policies.

> "I can do things with my lady friends. It gave me my life back."
> AUDREY JENNINGS, *speaking of day cay for her husband.*

Medicare does not pay for adult day programs -- nor necessarily the other options -- so participants generally pay out of pocket or look to long-term care insurance policies to chip in. Medicaid can cover the bill for poor patients in select programs.

"They need socialization," said Barbara Krueger, founder of seniorresource.com, an online clearinghouse of information for the elderly and their adult children based in Del Mar, Calif. "It gives Grandpa a chance to know their grandchildren because in the evening and early morning, they are home as a family. It allows the family to work."

John Williams, an energy consultant in San Diego, placed his wife of almost 50 years, Ruth Mae, in a day program in 1995, six years after her case of Alzheimer's disease was diagnosed. Three times a week for about 18 months, John Williams says, he dropped her off and picked her up. While he worked, she did puzzles and activities meant to keep her mind active.

Ruth Mae Williams was transferred to a nursing home when she became violent and the center no longer could handle her. She died two years later at 69. But John Williams, now 75, said the day program was indispensable.

"If I had to stay home, I not only would have lost income, I probably would have become the second victim of that disease," he said.

The United States has about 3,400 day programs but needs another 5,415 based on current and expected population needs, according to the Robert Wood Johnson study. Programs vary. Some are social, some medical and some oriented to dementia patients. Benefits vary accordingly and may include transportation, music and exercise classes, basic hygiene like hair washing, medical care, occupational therapy, meals and Alzheimer's assistance under one roof.

GuildCare in Manhattan, on a side street near Lincoln Center, addresses patients with vision problems through its comprehensive medical program. The lobby is airy. Its adult day program is held a basement that is well lighted, with brightly colored walls to assist patients who do not see well. Signs are in Braille for patients with more extensive impairment. Some clients are in wheelchairs, but most can walk on their own or with a cane.

About 65 people attend daily, and there are enough activities and rooms to make the center feel spacious. Patients seem engaged, and some of the women twitter about good-looking doctors. One day this month, a client was distributing the day's activity schedule as another prepared to demonstrate ballroom dancing in the central dining room. Down the hall are smaller rooms for poetry readings, music and crafts classes.

Clients receive physical, occupational and speech therapy, and nurses check medications and blood pressure. Social workers are on staff. Breakfast and lunch are served, and transportation and oversight are included.

Published August 29, 2005

Monday update: Decision on future of shelter due today
Donations to New Hope have kept facility open

Lansing State Journal

Lansing's Volunteers of America will announce today whether its day shelter will remain open past the end of this month.
"I'm counting my numbers," said Patrick Patterson, vice president of Lansing operations for Volunteers.
The New Hope Day Shelter, which serves about 100 homeless people a day, was set to close earlier this year after a 40 percent drop in revenue from car donations - its largest income source.
Donations of nearly $56,000 led leaders to say they could keep the shelter open at least until Aug. 31, but they didn't know for how much longer after that.
New Hope, at 430 North Larch St., served 1,974 individuals in the fiscal year that ended in June.
The five-day-a-week shelter is one of a number of homeless services in Lansing, which are paid for through a $1.2 million annual budget.
But the shelter suffered a financial setback when a federal tax law took effect Jan. 1 giving people less incentive to donate cars to charities.
The center expects to receive enough federal grant money to cover expenses, starting July 1, 2006, but it's working to raise money to stay open until then.
While traditional shelters offer the homeless a place to sleep seven days a week, New Hope operates Mondays through Fridays during business hours to help connect the needy with health and mental care, child care and finding an apartment.
"New Hope is where the work of recovery gets done," he said.

New effort aimed at helping homeless

Monday, August 29, 2005

By Jeff Alexander
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The Community Foundation for Muskegon County has established a new fund to help combat homelessness in the area.

The foundation, working with the Muskegon County Homelessness Continuum of Care Network, has established a special community endowment fund dedicated to homelessness prevention. Under the Homelessness Prevention Challenge Grant, the foundation will provide matching funds for direct services to the homeless for every dollar contributed to the new endowment fund, up to $10,000.

There are 250 homeless people living on the streets of Muskegon County at any given time, and more than 500 others staying with friends or family because they don't have a place to call their own, according to recent community surveys.

The new fund is an effort to provide more safe havens and other services for the homeless and people at risk of becoming homeless.

"This grant program offers a unique opportunity to the community," said Chris McGuigan, president of the Community Foundation. "We will gain not only much-needed services now to help the homeless, but it will also help us build sustainable resources so we can fight homelessness in our community today, tomorrow and in the decades to come."

The new fund is part of a program to combat homelessness called "Home More Not Less."

The homelessness prevention initiative is led by the Muskegon County Homelessness Continuum of Care Network, a group representing 43 area nonprofit agencies serving the homeless. The network recently received a $10,000 grant from the Council of Michigan Foundations and the Michigan State Housing Development Authority as part of the Homelessness Prevention Challenge Grant Program.

Arn Boezaart, vice president of programs for the Community Foundation, said recent job cuts announced by Sappi Fine Paper and Brunswick Corp., coupled with higher fuel prices, could increase the number of homeless people in Muskegon County in the coming months.

"In some respects we have not bottomed out yet on the difficult times we're facing," Boezaart said. "In addition to the job cuts announced locally, we have higher energy prices. I think we're going to be looking at a really tough winter for those people living on the margin."

The homelessness network and other local agencies will decide which projects receive grants from the new fund.

The $10,000 the network received from the state will be passed on to West Michigan Therapy, a nonprofit agency that provides substance-abuse counseling and transitional housing for Muskegon-area residents. West Michigan Therapy will use its grant to provide case management services for persons considered at risk of becoming homeless. The grant also requires the Homelessness Continuum of Care Network to develop a comprehensive strategy to prevent homelessness.

"All members of the Homelessness Continuum of Care Network share the vision of ensuring that everyone in Muskegon County has a place to call home," said Louis Churchwell, executive director of West Michigan Therapy. "With all of us working together, we see great opportunities for eradicating homelessness in Muskegon County."

Retreat, shelter team up on book

Sunday, August 28, 2005

By Gail Slaughter gslaughter@citpat.com -- 768-4911

A homeless shelter is hardly a retreat center. Yet both offer
a warm place away from the outside turmoil.
The shelter mainly provides for physical needs, though, while the retreat center looks inward toward spiritual ones. So perhaps it's not surprising that Nancy Angelo, director of Jackson's Cottage Retreat Center, decided to go to the Interfaith Shelter and help residents "find their voices to express what might otherwise remain hidden within themselves."
She and others from the Cottage visited the shelter on six evenings last winter and inspired people to write.
The result is "Sanctuary," a small collection of poetry and prose.
The short pieces came from people of all ages, from children to the elderly. The writing was transcribed as written, not edited for spelling or grammar.
Angelo got people started with a box of words and phrases cut from magazines. People would choose a word and "write whatever came to mind."
Those who seemed reluctant to write could decorate the covers of their notebooks, "then we'd encourage them to write something inside."
Angelo said she would like to do the project again if the Cottage can find the funding.
"Sanctuary" is available for $3 at the Cottage, 756 W. Michigan Ave. Call 796-5670.

Columnists

DAVID BRADY: Tell poverty truth

Stats don't capture breadth, depth of poor

August 28, 2005

Detroit Free Press

BY DAVID BRADY

Each August, we, Americans, tell ourselves a lie.

On Tuesday, the Census Bureau will release the official poverty rates for 2004. Pundits, politicians, the press and the president will almost certainly rehearse empty remarks on why poverty is higher or lower than last year, and attribute this failure or success to things that really have nothing to do with poverty's true causes. This entire episode is profoundly dishonest.

This dishonesty is not because U.S. poverty is insignificant. Nearly 36 million people in the United States, or 12.5% of the nation's population, are officially poor. But better estimates put those numbers closer to 18%, or 48 million people.

U.S. poverty is nearly twice as high as that of Canada and the United Kingdom, and about three times as high as that of many European countries. The United States is the richest country in the world, but it has the most poverty of any industrialized democracy.

The dishonesty is not the fault of government statisticians such as Molly Orshansky, who constructed the formula for the official measure in 1963. With data from 1955, Orshansky multiplied the Department of Agriculture's "low-cost food budget" by three, assuming food amounted to one-third of a family's expenses. She developed this poverty line purely for research, not for policy, and she quickly repudiated it.

Unfortunately, President Lyndon Johnson's administration substituted the "economy food plan," which was about 25% lower, and made it the official measure. By doing so, it purposefully set the line low so they could win the War on Poverty. The measure neglects taxes and government assistance, has been adjusted only for inflation and, as a result, ignores the enormous changes in families since 1955.

The Census Bureau, aware of these problems, presents alternatives and pushes Congress to revise the official measure. Unfortunately, it has never been revised.

The dishonesty is not due to social science. Most international poverty researchers use a relative measure. Even economists Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek observed a person is poor relative to the living standards and customs of a time and place.

Some skeptics might regurgitate the unoriginal response that the U.S. poor are rich compared to people in developing countries. But the American poor don't live in developing countries. Heck, if one plays with comparisons to previous centuries or Africa, it is easy to say that there are no poor people in the United States.

The poor are poor relative to what it takes to make ends meet and participate as citizens in contemporary U.S. communities. As Michael Harrington wrote:

"To have one bowl of rice in a society where all other people have half a bowl may well be a sign of achievement and intelligence. ... To have five bowls of rice in a society where the majority have a decent, balanced diet is a tragedy."

State-of-the-art measures embrace relative poverty. First, we estimate the median income after considering all taxes and assistance. Then, we define poverty as living in a household with less than 50% of that median. With this measure, the Luxembourg Income Study, the most sophisticated international poverty research outfit, estimates that 17% of the U.S. population would have been poor in 2000, not the official 11.3%.

To see how this affects policy, look at the debate surrounding President George W. Bush's push to privatize Social Security. We hear that the United States has conquered elderly poverty. Surely, the elderly live more securely than in the 1960s, and Social Security certainly has reduced elderly poverty. But, according to the Luxembourg Income Study, 24.7% of the elderly were poor in 2000, not just the official 9.9%.

The dishonesty of official poverty is not even entirely the responsibility of politicians. Though guilty of an unwillingness to revise the official measure, I've never heard a politician intentionally misrepresent poverty statistics.

In contrast to budget debates, for example, political commentary on poverty statistics seems quaintly sincere. The dishonesty is really the fault of us, the American people. Only on rare occasions do we even bother to acknowledge the poor. Most of the time, we contentedly believe that only a few people are poor and that those undeserving poor have themselves to blame. This, of course, is a lie. But when we are told a lie many, many times, and obvious evidence, if we bothered to look at it, shows it is false, we are equally responsible for perpetuating the dishonesty.

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