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Friday, March 23, 2007

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WNEM TV5
MID-MICHIGAN'S NEWS LEADER

Father Sentenced In Death Of His Infant Son

March 22, 2007 05:06 PM EDT

(TV5) -- An Isabella County resident will be spending time behind bars for the death of his infant son. Christopher Leiter will serve at least 20 years in prison for the shaking death of his 3-month-old son Ben Smith.

Leiter shook the baby so violently he broke his ribs and caused head trauma. Ben was in a vegetative state for five years and died last year.

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LOCAL NEWS BRIEFS

Adrian Daily Telegram Thursday, March 22, 2007 4:05 PM EDT

Pleads to child abuse

From staff reports

ADRIAN — An Adrian woman accused of damaging a 3-year-old boy's pancreas and breaking his 10-month-old sister's arm while babysitting them last fall pleaded guilty to a reduced charge Wednesday in Lenawee County Circuit Court.

Katie May Vandever, 35, pleaded guilty to a single charge of third-degree child abuse. She was returned to jail to await sentencing that Judge Harvey A. Koselka scheduled for April 13. Vandever faces up to a two-year prison term for the conviction.

"I hit him in the stomach. Hard," Vandever stated in making her guilty plea. The boy was transferred from Bixby Medical Center to Toledo Children's Hospital for treatment of his pancreas after injury from the Oct. 26 beating was diagnosed. First-degree child abuse charges involving that incident and a broken arm suffered by the boy's younger sister on Nov. 7 are to be dismissed. The first-degree charges carry maximum 15-year prison terms.

Vandever has been in jail in lieu of bonds totaling $120,000 since her arrest in November.

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March 23, 2007

'Their mother's in a better place'

Tara Grant's sister tries to protect children as they wonder where mom is

George Hunter / The Detroit News

ROMEO -- Tara and Stephen Grant's two children are being shielded from the horror that has ripped their family apart, but as their mother's funeral approaches they are starting to ask questions about what happened to her, Tara's sister, Alicia Standerfer, said Thursday.

"They understand that Mom is dead, and they're very, very sad about that," Standerfer said. "With the funeral approaching, more questions are coming up about what happened. My husband and I are doing everything in our power to help them get through this.

"Every night, we read a book to them about heaven, to explain their mother's in a better place," Standerfer said. "I think it's helping."

Tara Grant's funeral is scheduled for Sunday in Escanaba, near her hometown. Stephen Grant is in the Macomb County Jail on charges he strangled and dismembered his wife -- but the children do not know that, Standerfer said.

"The kids think their father is in the hospital," said Standerfer, who is temporarily taking care of the Grant children until permanent custody can be determined. "We're going to leave it at that until we can sit down with a psychologist to figure out the best way to explain what happened."

A judge's decision Thursday may help restore a bit of normalcy to the two children, ages 6 and 4. Judge Denis LeDuc ruled that the Grants' Washington Township home is no longer an active crime scene, meaning family members may go in to retrieve personal items.

The home was off-limits to anyone but investigators, because police say Stephen Grant strangled his wife there on Feb. 9.

"Now Alicia can go inside the house to get the kids' toys," Prosecutor Eric Smith said. "Like most other kids, they have a lot of things in their room I'm sure they'd like to have with them."

Standerfer said she doesn't plan to retrieve the children's personal items until after her sister's funeral.

"It'll be nice for them to have their own beds, dressers and things like that," Standerfer said. "We'd like them to have their own belongings, to make them feel like they're in a home, instead of being shuffled from one place to another."

Also Thursday, Judge LeDuc postponed a decision on a request by Stephen Grant's attorney for an emergency order that would prohibit police and prosecutors from releasing information about the case to the media.

He said he needs to review a large amount of material before he can decide whether releasing it would hurt Grant's chances for a fair trial.

"I see some difficult problems in being able to rule on this today," LuDuc said. "The material is voluminous, to say the least."

Grant's attorney, Stephen Rabaut, said: "My role here is to try to make sure my client receives a fair trial down the road. We have a lot of material to go through. There are many things I anticipate are within the material which should not be released."

The judge will review the request for the emergency motion again on April 3.

*You can reach George Hunter at (586) 468-7396 or **ghunter@detnews.com**.*

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Published March 23, 2007

Man who killed at 11, now 21, planning to attend Wayne State

Associated Press

PONTIAC - A 21-year-old man recently freed from custody for a murder he committed at age 11 has a clerical job, plans to attend Wayne State University and gives frequent motivational talks to children, his mentor says.

Nathaniel Abraham was 13 when an Oakland County jury convicted him of second-degree murder for the 1997 rifle-slaying of 18-year-old Ronnie Greene Jr. in Pontiac. Abraham finished serving his juvenile sentence Jan. 18.

John W. Cromer, a job developer for a group that matches released offenders with jobs said Abraham will start classes at Wayne State this summer and wants to study writing and major in business. Abraham also has been recording hip-hop music, Cromer said.

Abraham speaks to church groups and students, urging children to stay in school and avoid trouble, The Oakland Press reported Thursday.

"He loves reaching out to the community," Cromer said.

Oakland County assistant prosecutor Deborah Carley said she was concerned that Abraham might return to Pontiac, his former hometown. He moved to Bay City after his release.

"My thought was always that he would probably do better if he remained in an environment away from his family and his previous influences," Carley said.

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March 23, 2007

Oakland County

Abraham supporters livid

County prosecutor jokes on radio talk show about young man's chances of committing another crime.

Catherine Jun / The Detroit News

Friends and family of Nathaniel Abraham, the 21-year-old recently released after almost 10 years in custody for murder, were outraged Thursday after learning of a comment made by Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca on a morning radio show, saying his office joked about when Abraham might commit another crime.

"It's just a stupid, stupid thing for an official in such a high position to say," said Daniel Bagdade, Abraham's attorney. "Everybody is upset by that quote."

Those close to Abraham say the remark is especially unfair because of the way he has worked to get his life on track since his Jan. 18 release. He has a job and is making plans for college.

On Wednesday, Gorcyca and Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox were on the Drew and Mike Show at WRIF in Detroit. During the two-hours-plus interview, Gorcyca said about Abraham: "There's a joke in the office about the over/under before he reoffends."

Abraham was 13 when he was convicted of second-degree murder for the 1997 rifle slaying of Ronnie Greene Jr., 18, outside a party store in Pontiac. He was 11 at the time of the shooting.

Gorcyca said Thursday he had made a "poor choice of words" on the radio show, adding "there is certainly no office pool or friendly wager about Abraham's future."

He explained that after hearing from police Abraham was recently spotted in Pontiac, staffers had a "serious" discussion expressing concerns about his falling back into trouble.

Meanwhile, Abraham is scheduled to start a full-time clerical job Monday at a private general contracting firm in Detroit. He also plans to attend Wayne State University this summer, said John W. Cromer Jr., Abraham's mentor.

Abraham also spends his time recording hip-hop music and giving talks to children at community centers and churches, Cromer said.

After his release, Abraham was set to work as a janitor in Bay City, a job arranged through the Michigan Department of Human Services. But Bagdade said the job fell through.

Abraham is scheduled to move from Bay City into a new apartment in Oakland County today, Bagdade said.

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WNEM TV5
MID-MICHIGAN'S NEWS LEADER

Teen In Jail After Mugging Outside Saginaw Bar

March 22, 2007 05:03 PM EDT

(TV5) -- A local teen has been arraigned accused of using a realistic-looking BB gun to rob a woman outside a local bar. It happened around midnight march 21st, near Steamer's Pub on Hamilton Street in Old Town Saginaw; police say he didn't act alone.

Saginaw Police were able to use tracking dogs to hunt down one of the suspects, but the second suspect got away. But the one who was caught, had a date with a judge march 22nd. At his arraignment 15 year old Ja'Quavius Winston sat silently as a Saginaw County magistrate denied his bond at a preliminary hearing.

The Saginaw teen is accused of using a BB gun to rob a woman in the two block of North Hamilton. The woman was getting out of her car here, in a parking lot, when two suspects approached her, they robbed her of her purse and cell phone.

It happened so quick, that she never realized the bandits were using a BB gun. A Saginaw Police tracking dog picked up the scent of the two teens and tracked them four blocks away to Aimes and Granger where Winston was apprehended.

The area of the robbery is part of Saginaw's most popular bar and restaurant district, and people we talked to said they were surprised by the incident. Fifteen year old Ja'Quavius Winston is in the Saginaw County Juvenile Detention Center. Prosecutors say they might try him as an adult.

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Published March 23, 2007

Avail Project works to reduce 'at-risk' for Battle Creek kids

Mentors, teens meet to discuss solutions for social issues

Ryan Holland
Special to the State Journal

(Photo by John Grap/Special to the State Journal)
Connection with mentor: Iris Wilcox of South Hill Academy watches Bob Long of the Kellogg Foundation, whom she introduced, at Wednesday evening's AVAIL project meeting at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Jacob Gore, a Kellogg Community College student and Battle Creek native, sees some of himself in his current group of Avail Project mentees.

"In high school, I was the bad kid," said the 30-year-old Harper Creek graduate. "You know the one. I was going out there and getting in all kinds of trouble."

And so Wednesday night at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, where Gore, fellow mentors and at-risk teens in the Avail program were gathered to discuss solutions to social issues plaguing Battle Creek, things seemed to come full circle.

Make connections

"I can see where these kids are coming from, and now they're starting to see that they are the ones that have to do something to change things around," said Gore, who used a military scholarship to enroll at KCC.

The 15-week Avail Project, operated by the Volunteer Center of Battle Creek and funded by a $300,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation, seeks to connect mentors and at-risk students in order to improve their own communities.

The project kicked off for the semester four weeks ago, and will culminate in May with five student work groups each presenting a plan for a community service project.

Groups made up of teens from Operation G.R.A.D., the Advocates and South Hill Academy all participated in the event Wednesday. They listened to speeches from community leaders and activists and then began to brainstorm their own ideas for community service projects.

Issues addressed

Carol Head, from Summit Pointe mental health counseling facility, spoke about teen alcohol abuse while Battle Creek Police Officer Vincent Munoz went into ongoing local gang violence. Kate Segal, the vice-chairwoman of the Calhoun County Commission, addressed the county's homelessness situation.

Dr. Robert Long, the director of Greater Battle Creek Programming for the Kellogg Foundation, said the Avail Project was unique in that the students themselves were being held responsible for their own communities.

"Whatever the kids come up with, good or bad, effective or not, is being driven by them," he said. "It's an experience where they are taking the active role."

During the brainstorming session, the Operation G.R.A.D. students, under the tutelage of Jacob Gore, began to explore the roots of the issues they had just heard about.

"The main thing we see is that we're bored," said 16-year-old James Yingling. "You see a lot of kids just walking around. That's when you see bad decisions; people have got nothing better to do."

Right direction

While tangible solutions to the lack of activities escaped the students for the night, simply addressing them, they said, was a step in the right direction.

"We get to decide what's good for us," said Amber Smith, 19. "We have friends who can't do anything about their situation. We're trying to help them out, no matter how small it might be."

Ryan Holland of the Battle Creek Enquirer can be reached at 966-0690 or rholland @battlecr.gannett.com.

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THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Daughter is charged

Accused of attempted murder by severing mom's oxygen tube

Friday, March 23, 2007

BY AMALIE NASH

News Staff Reporter

An Ann Arbor woman is accused of severing the oxygen tube that fed air to her elderly mother, after complaining to her estranged husband about the cost of housing her in an assisted living facility in Chelsea.

Linda Popevich Davis, 45, is charged with attempted murder and vulnerable adult abuse based on a nearly seven-month investigation. A preliminary hearing in the case is scheduled for Tuesday.

According to a police report released this week under the Freedom of Information Act, officers were called to Silver Maples of Chelsea on Aug. 28 after someone noticed a woman slumped over at the wheel of her vehicle in the parking lot just before midnight. Police said they found Davis in her car, smelling of alcohol.

Staff members later went inside the assisted living facility to check for evidence that Davis had been drinking in her 80-year-old mother's room.

A nurse emerged minutes later and said she discovered the oxygen supply hose connected to Edna Popevich had been cut at the nostrils, reports said. Popevich suffers from dementia and emphysema, which requires her to be on a constant oxygen supply, police reports said.

In an interview with police, Popevich said her daughter had visited that evening and she had fallen asleep on the couch after Davis left. She did not awaken until officers came into her room and became concerned when told of the cut oxygen line, saying she believed she could die if she did not have it, reports said.

A physician told police she was not in immediate life-threatening danger from the cut line, but would have been in danger after an indeterminate amount of time.

Davis was taken to Chelsea Community Hospital with a blood alcohol content of 0.42 - more than five times the legal limit for drunken driving, the police reports said.

Her estranged husband told police that Davis had complained a week earlier that caring for her mother was costing $6,000 to $8,000 a month and would soon make her go broke, according to the reports. "I wish this would end," she reportedly said. The estranged husband did not return a call from The News.

Joseph Simon, Davis' attorney, declined to comment Thursday. Davis did not make a statement to police.

Jerry Wilczynski, executive director of Silver Maples, said Thursday that Popevich still lives there. He said employees are cooperating with police, but declined further comment to protect the family's privacy.

Although the incident occurred in August, charges were not filed until the end of January. Washtenaw County Deputy Chief Assistant Prosecutor Steve Hiller said the case was under investigation for several months. He said he could not discuss the facts or evidence in the case.

Davis faces charges of assault with intent to commit murder, attempted murder and first-degree vulnerable adult abuse. She remains free on 10 percent of $10,000 bond with several conditions, including no unsupervised visits with her mother and alcohol and drug outpatient treatment.

Amalie Nash can be reached at anash@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6832.

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WNEM TV5
MID-MICHIGAN'S NEWS LEADER

Scammers Hitting Homes Of Elderly Across Mid-Michigan

March 21, 2007 05:18 PM EDT

(TV5) -- A neighborhood crime alert is spreading across Mid-Michigan.

Three more locations, all in Shiawassee County, have been added to the list of homes hit by a scam that preys on the good-hearted elderly. The suspects are a man and woman who use two children as a way to get victim's houses. One of the ruses is to say the boy is mentally disabled.

Out in a rural area of Shiawassee County, the alleged scam artists made Joe Svrcek and his wife one of their targets on March 21st. The scammers asked to come in, saying the boy had to use the bathroom. Svrcek knew something was up when, once inside his house, the woman suspect asked for a glass of water then didn't drink it.

The suspects managed to slip away. The adult couple and two children have been busy the past few days, hitting homes in Oakland County, Mundy Township, Birch Run and at least three homes in Shiawassee County. Investigators are still trying to sort out whether anything was stolen in the most recent cases. The 85-year-old Svrcek isn't sure if anything was taken from his home.

The suspects are a man and woman aged 35 to 45 years old, with a 12 year old boy and 7 year old girl. They're driving a dull red vehicle. If you have any information on these scammers, call the Shiawassee County Sheriff's Office at 989-743-2297.

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Article published Mar 22, 2007

State earns 2 homeless awards

Michigan has garnered attention recently with its strides to call an end to homelessness on a statewide level.

At the second annual National Summit on Homelessness, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness recognized Michigan and Gov. Jennifer Granholm with the Every American Deserves A Home Award for the encouragement and leadership of Michigan's statewide Campaign to End Homelessness.

"We must continue to fan the flames of compassion and come together in pursuing a comprehensive strategy to end homelessness because no person should have to suffer on the streets through a cold Michigan winter and no child's future should be threatened by missing school because she has no home," Gov. Granholm said.

"As we work to revitalize our economy and build vibrant cities across the state, we must also have the willpower, focus and funding to confront today's epidemic of homelessness."

Michigan's initiative has included developing complex strategies designed to eliminate barriers, streamline services and create solutions that will end homelessness as a costly social problem.

Collecting the award for the governor was Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) Executive Director Michael R. DeVos, who spoke last week to a crowd of people in Monroe about local efforts to tackle the issue.

"Our state's effort is a mature one because we recognize that the work needs to happen at the local level," said Mr. DeVos after receiving the award.

The summit's theme, "Pursuit of Solutions," was inspired by the hit movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," starring Will Smith portraying the true story of Chris Gardner. The film also was shown before Mr. DeVos' talk in Monroe.

On April 26, Gov. Granholm also will receive on behalf of Michigan the Public Sector Achievement Award from the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Michigan is the first state in the country to require each county to have a ten-year plan to end homelessness at the local level.

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THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

Angel Baby effort gives kids a boost

Friday, March 23, 2007

By Bea Boucher

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- As a homeless teenager with a 5-month-old daughter, Jocelyn Helderop cannot afford to buy basics such as diapers, bottles or baby shampoo.

Now, thanks to a 2-year-old initiative between the Kent County Education Association and the Salvation Army, 18-year-old Helderop and other teen parents and low-income families throughout Kent County can get some of the essentials they need for their infants and young children.

KCEA members recently donated more than 3,000 personal care items for infants and children through age 5 to the Angel Baby program, including baby food, clothes, bottles, diapers and toys. The Salvation Army's Booth Services will distribute the items to those in need.

In addition, KCEA President Harold Ebenstein Thursday presented Salvation Army representatives with a $500 check to be used for educational enrichment opportunities for families that can not afford to visit places such as John Ball Zoo, Frederik Meijer Gardens and area museums.

Standing next to tables stacked with infant care items, Helderop marveled at the community's generosity.

"Sometimes I can't afford to get bottles or diapers or shampoo," said Helderop, a junior at Grand Rapids Montessori High School who has lived at the Salvation Army's Teen Parent Center for the past seven months.

"I'm amazed anybody donated anything to us. Not a lot of people care about pregnant teens. I appreciate everything," she said.

Bill Dungey, Uniserv director for KCEA, said the group, which represents 6,500 teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, secretaries, food service workers and custodians, deals with young children every day and sees firsthand some of the needs their families have.

"This seemed an opportunity for our members to give back in a significant way. We're going to get these kids in one of our schools in the future. If we can help them be productive students and help their families, it's a natural fit," Dungey said.

Susan Van Syckle, a clinic social worker for Booth Family Services, said she already has begun distributing items to the young parents she works with.

"Often, the women we see, they may not have any resources to get these things. They don't have an opportunity to get nice things like this," she said.

Dungey hopes the Angel Baby program will continue to grow as other people see the need for it.

"We know we're doing something positive," he said.

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Article published Mar 23, 2007

STATE: Senate kills plan to tax services

School aid could dwindle in effort to erase state deficit

By Chris Christoff
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's proposed 2% tax on many services and entertainment was declared dead Thursday.

On a party-line vote, the state's Republican-led Senate rejected the plan, which was the centerpiece of Granholm's proposal to raise $1.5 billion in new revenues to help erase a $3-billion deficit that looms into 2008.

It came in a whirlwind of actions that saw Granholm and Senate Republicans exchange hundreds of millions of dollars of proposed budget cuts, and set the stage for a final budget showdown, perhaps next month.

State Rep. George Cushingberry, D-Detroit and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, agreed that the proposed 2% excise tax no longer was an option. But Cushingberry said he'd look at other tax increases -- possibly an income tax hike or expanding the state's 6% sales tax to some services -- as part of a budget-balancing agreement.

Senate Republicans pledged to oppose tax increases.

After two days of intense negotiations between Granholm and House and Senate leaders, Thursday's actions showed that, when it comes to taxes and budget cuts, Granholm and legislative Democrats remain far apart from Republicans on how to balance the budget this year and next.

Republicans raised the ante by ramming through on partisan votes $630 million in spending for schools and state government, including a $34-per-pupil cut in state aid for schools and a $40-million cut in revenue sharing to local governments.

Granholm began the day's flurry by announcing a partial deal with Republicans to cut $344.6 million from this fiscal year's budget, which faces a $940-million deficit by the time the fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

She criticized Republican lawmakers and called the agreement a "baby step" toward resolving the state's budget crisis.

Senate Republicans swiftly approved Granholm's ordered cuts, then voted to whack $377.4 million from the state School Aid Fund.

A few hours later, the Senate GOP forced a vote to cut another $255 million from the general fund, drawing the ire of Democrats who said the cuts would hurt cities -- especially Detroit -- and people who are mentally ill or poor.

The Senate-approved cuts also include $14 million from adult foster care services, a 1% cut in Medicaid payments to doctors and hospitals, a $14.7-million reduction in subsidies to local bus services and $7 million in subsidies for programs to help recently released prisoners reestablish themselves in their communities.

One of the bigger targeted cuts was $21 million from the Detroit Wayne Community Mental Health program.

But the Senate bill added $2.5 million to the State Police budget to avert 29 trooper layoffs that Granholm had promised.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, R-Rochester, said that any cuts are painful but that the state must downsize to promote economic growth.

"We've been listening to people of this state who repeatedly said no to new taxes that would unduly burden citizens and business," Bishop said. "We listened to those who said the government is obligated to share in the sacrifice and reduce its operating budget. It's why we cut our legislative budget first."

Bishop said the Senate votes will separate this year's and next year's budgets into separate bargaining issues.

Granholm strongly urged a plan aimed at solving both years' fiscal problems. She had called for enacting a 2% excise tax by June to increase revenues for the current fiscal year.

"We believe the state's economic and fiscal crisis requires a comprehensive solution, a solution that reflects cuts, reforms and revenues," Granholm said. "It's a solution that requires big thinking."

But the Senate rejection of her tax proposal appeared to kill it, at least for this fiscal year.

Following the Senate vote, Liz Boyd, spokeswoman for Granholm, said the Senate Republican actions "slammed the door on investing in the future of our state."

There was no legislative action to kill or approve Granholm's other tax proposals, including a 5-cent-a-pack tax increase on cigarettes and increases in liquor and estate taxes.

Granholm's executive order included $171.5 million in actual cuts to state programs, the rest was in accounting changes to state programs, such as reducing the amount paid into state employee retirement funds.

Greg Bird, spokesman for the State Budget Office, said Granholm's executive order cuts would not result in layoffs. It was not immediately clear whether the Senate's actions would.

Cushingberry said he wants to see what cuts the Senate proposes and that the House could combine the cuts by Granholm and the Senate into a single action. Still, he was skeptical about the Senate's plans.

Cushingberry said any new tax plan should reverse a trend to shift taxes from wealthy taxpayers and businesses to low-income people. "Whatever we come out with, we'll try to better equalize that," he said.

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Bill Berkowitz
March 23, 2007

Ten years after welfare reform recipients decline while poverty rate increases

Safety net of services and support that once protected the poor lies in tatters

In early February, during an Interview with PBS' Tavis Smiley, Frank Luntz, a longtime Republican Party pollster and maestro of focus groups, pointed out that welfare reform was one of the biggest policy successes over the past 10 years. Luntz's evaluation mirrors the assessment of most conservative think tanks and public policy institutes. A deeper look, however, reveals a mixed bag of significant successes as well as glaring failures.

- In the state that is dead last in the nation in moving people from welfare to work over the past 10 years, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels is proposing increased privatization for the state's ailing welfare system; a $1.6 billion plan that would hand over more of the state's system to IBM and a host of other for-profit companies. Daniels is a first-term Republican who was for many years a director of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the nation's leading philanthropy in the area of privatizing public services.
- Allegany County, Maryland officials are touting statistics that show that since 1996, it has reduced the number of persons dependent upon public cash assistance from 4,829 to 466, a reduction of 90 percent. "While Allegany County is still plagued by a relatively high rate of poverty (13.5 percent compared to Maryland's statewide rate of eight percent), it should be noted," Richard Paulman, director of the county's Department of Social Services wrote in a piece published in the *Cumberland Times-News*, "that very few of our residents receive public cash assistance."
- In Wisconsin, according to a report from *Wheeler News Service*, the state's W-2 Welfare to Work program "is either a rousing success or an expensive boondoggle in need of reform," depending on who is evaluating the program.

"The goal of reducing welfare dependence, as measured by reducing the number of people getting welfare, has been attained," a recent story posted at *religionlink.org* noted. "At the end of 1996, 12.3 million people were on welfare. At the end of 2005, almost 4.4 million people received assistance, a drop of almost 65 percent. Yet even as the number of people receiving welfare has declined, the poverty rate in this country has risen four years in a row, creating a confusing picture of life at the bottom of the economic ladder."

"Ten years into welfare reform, caseloads may have decreased, but the number of people living in poverty has not," Robert Wharton, the president and chief executive officer of the Community Economic Development Administration, wrote in a recent story in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "At the same time, the safety net of services and support that once protected the poor lies in tatters. Today, working parents in ill-paid jobs often work themselves right out of eligibility for desperately needed assistance."

During his 1992 presidential campaign, Democratic Party candidate Bill Clinton promised to "end welfare as we know it." Four years later as president, he signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, commonly known as "welfare reform." That landmark legislation set work requirements for most welfare recipients and limited the length of time they could collect assistance. (The law's "charitable choice" provision allowed religious organizations to receive government funding for providing certain welfare-related services.)

There is no question that welfare reform has succeeded in *reducing welfare rolls* in the states. It also proffered a golden calf to corporations that were prepared to take advantage of the wholesale or partial privatization of welfare systems in a number of states. And, in January 2001, President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative opened the doors to religious organizations to get government grants to provide services previously made available by government agencies.

The end result is that, despite (or, because of) the dramatic decline in the number of welfare recipients -- by perhaps more than 50 percent nationally -- there is also growing evidence that poverty in the U.S. has actually deepened.

In addition, "welfare reform", an issue that once commanded at least some attention in the mainstream media, has basically fallen off of that radar screen.

The outcomes of welfare to work programs vary from state to state, and from locality to locality. Some programs have changed lives for the better, helping former welfare recipients find good jobs with decent wages and benefits. Other W-2 initiatives have failed and are complicit in the creation of a new under-class with more women and children in poverty lacking even the most fundamental services.

A 2002 report by the Chicago, Illinois-based Joyce Foundation found that while hundreds of thousands of welfare recipients in the Midwest went to work since 1996, most had "taken jobs that pay low wages, are part-time, or don't last ... As a result, most of those who have made the transition from welfare to work remain poor."

The foundation's report, titled "Welfare to Work: What Have We Learned?" looked at welfare-to-work initiatives in Midwestern states including Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, and found that "both before and since 1996, these states ... pioneered innovative strategies to support welfare recipients' transition to work, including ‘work first' and ‘making work pay' by offering cash assistance and other supports to working families."

"Work supports -- such as child care, food stamps, and the Earned Income Tax Credit -- have helped thousands of working families make ends meet. But many of the jobs recipients took are part time or short term, and wages are low. As a result, many working families still face serious economic hardships."

Evaluating a decade of welfare to work programs is an arduous undertaking, Professor Robert Cherry, the author of the forthcoming book "Welfare Transformed: Universalizing Family Policies that Work" (Oxford University Press, 2007), told me in an email exchange. "You can get into trouble with welfare-to-work state evaluations because of the arbitrariness of the states one might select. There are manpower development research studies of specific welfare-to-work programs that produced varied results depending upon their emphasis on education and training versus Work First."

"In addition," said Cherry, a professor of economics at Brooklyn College, "there is the issue of the state of the economy; differences produced during the economic boom of the late 1990s versus the economic stagnation of the last five years. Finally, there is the issue of the clientele as measured by barriers to work (educational background, transportation issues, child care, health issues, etc.)"

However, Cherry was quick to note that during the first five years or so of the programs, "there is no question that ... there was no mixed bag: 60 percent or more of welfare leavers were better off and 10 percent or fewer were worse off."

"If we define success in terms of helping women to take care of themselves and their families, we've seen some programs do better than others," said Jane Henrici, an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Memphis." In an email interview, Henrici, the editor of the recently published book, "Doing Without: Women and Work after Welfare Reform" (University of Arizona Press, 2006), maintained that "At least in the short term, women have reported more positive experiences where resources have been put into subsidized child care and early education, as well as other supports that vary by the region -- such as substantive job training or support for higher education, reliable public transportation, and accessible health care facilities."

Henrici also pointed out that "Privatization and related features of the policies and their implementation have not proven to be beneficial: Too many women continue to struggle to find and keep a job that either pays enough to cover health care or provides benefits at the same time as their health and that of their children decline. In addition, the rising costs of housing, and of education for themselves as well as their children, make any sense of financial stability a target that keeps moving out of reach."

Statistics can only properly tell part of the story. Henrici's "In Doing Without," goes beyond the numbers by bringing together stories from the frontlines; "from inside the lives of the women who live with it," the book's promotional materials states. "Cases from Chicago and Boston ... combined with a focus on San Antonio ... one of the largest multi-city investigations on welfare reform ever undertaken [reveal] that the employment opportunities available to poorer women, particularly single mothers and ethnic minorities, are insufficient to lift their families out of poverty."

Contributors to the book look at "the challenges that the women who seek assistance, and those who work in public and private agencies to provide it, together must face as they navigate ever-changing requirements and regulations, decipher alterations in Medicaid, and apply for training and education. Contributors urge that the nation should repair the social safety net for women in transition and offer genuine access to jobs with wages that actually meet the cost of living."

Although Professor Cherry admits to being "more positive towards the effects of the 1996 legislation" than many others involved in these issues, he argues that "we should not dwell on the evaluations to determine whether or not [welfare reform] was a success for single mothers." Cherry suggests that it "is most important is to draw lessons from the various policies that were put in place to aid the transition to work: tax policies, childcare policies, educational policies, etc." By building on the successes, "We can better the lives of a large group of working mothers, most of which were never on welfare. That's the reason I titled my book, 'Welfare Transformed: Universalizing Family Policies that Work," he added.

Last November advocates, and a few critics, of welfare reform showed up in Washington, D.C. at a mostly celebratory forum sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the Annie E. Casey Foundation marking the legislation's tenth anniversary. Newt Gingrich, a primary architect of the 1994 Republican "Revolution" -- which took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in decades, leading the way to the passage of welfare reform -- was the Keynote Speaker. Gingrich the former House Speaker who was forced to resign his post over ethics questions and

who currently has his eye on becoming the GOP's presidential standard bearer in 2008, told the audience that while welfare reform was a major success, there was still more work to do. There are the "harder cases," the people who have been "left behind," Gingrich said. "Now we must reach out and find a totally new approach" to reach people across the country who remain "outside the system," Gingrich said.

Wendell Primus, currently a policy advisor to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, was an outspoken critic of the original legislation; he resigned from the Clinton administration over welfare reform. In his remarks, Primus maintained that "while many families had earnings gains under welfare reform, a significant number would have done better without welfare reform under the expanding economy of the 1990s," *CNSNews.com* reported.

"In the aggregate, there is absolutely no evidence that it (reform legislation) increased household income," said Primus, pointing out that the rates of child poverty dropped more in the 1992-1996, pre-welfare-reform period, than they did in the post-reform period, from 1996-2000.

Ten years after welfare reform, there still needs to be a comprehensive look at what the full decade has wrought. While studies of the first five years touted successes -- in the context of the development of new programs and services within a period of economic growth -- the story of the last five years is largely untold. Are the early commitments of W-2 being sustained and are those who have profited from this program growth being held accountable for their costs and results? Did "work first" efforts lead to decent jobs and economic stability? Have the social and economic conditions of women, and perhaps even more importantly, their children, improved?

The Community Economic Development Administration's Robert Wharton suggests that we "begin to take better-planned, more deliberate action to alleviate poverty. Such an effort will require a federal agency charged with mounting a coordinated, nationwide attack on poverty... We must also include as a priority in budgeting -- from the federal level down -- some sort of entitlement to basic necessities, including shelter, food, health care and education. These programs should be run on a sliding scale, so that the working poor are not penalized for earning what they can.

"We need scholars, social analysts and politicians courageous enough to shepherd us in this national discussion of poverty. We must commit to the philosophy of providing for the neediest, or we will continue -- unconscionably -- to tolerate intolerable poverty at home and in the larger world."