

The Sunday Oregonian

Founded Dec. 4, 1850. Established as a daily Feb. 4, 1861.
The Sunday Oregonian established Dec. 4, 1881.

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Creating a new safety network

Oregon needs a new vision and a new plan that includes our less fortunate neighbors

“M any of our fellow human beings are without shelter, without adequate food, without adequate clothing, and without health care. Too often we react to each other out of bigotry or greed,” wrote Robert W. McConnell of Tigard.

In hundreds of worried responses, Oregonians demonstrated their heartfelt concern for the poor in reply to “The New Oregon Century,” our invitation to recommend ways solve statewide problems involving economic growth and land use, poverty and youth.

But as hard as it was to find common ground on the state’s growth problems, readers were of as many minds on how to relieve the stresses of poverty.

“Enable citizens to pay a portion of their state (and ideally federal) taxes through volunteer work,” wrote Kim Breas of Northeast Portland. Publish more articles to encourage volunteerism, urged Marguerite Duncan of Beaverton.

Responses came from all corners of the state and the suggestions were all over the map.

A handful of readers recommended self-reliance to the impoverish- ed: “Able-bodied individuals should be attempting to pay their way,” wrote Randy Sines from Oregon City.

THE NEW OREGON CENTURY

This is the second of three editorials addressing the issues raised in our New Oregon Century project. This editorial was written by Nanine Alexander, for the editorial board.

Others expressed dismay over a widening income gap. “It is the countries with . . . the smallest gap between rich and poor that fare the best,” wrote Raquel Bournhonesque. A pediatrician, Dr. J. Allen Johnson, wrote that Oregon appears to have “lost its vision. The population seems more focused on tax cuts . . .”

Perhaps the vision’s not lost, just out of focus. With downtown development of \$300,000-and-up loft condos, it does sometimes appear that Oregon is increasingly becoming a great place to live mainly for those with personal financial advisers.

If readers’ approach to poverty appears fragmented, who could blame them? The deeper you dig into the social services in this region, the more apparent it becomes that the safety net is a patchwork, jury-rigged affair. The infrastructure to assist the poor in helping themselves is resting on rusting supports. If the economy takes a sharp downturn, if a few thousand more are denied food stamps or squeezed out of subsidized housing, the entrance ramp to economic self-sufficiency could collapse.

“I believe it’s high time we collectively gather a vision of a higher level of civilization and begin striving for the best possible living conditions. . . . At the same time, we must develop a positive attitude of diversity, tolerance and empathy for all.”

Robert W. Mc Connell,
Tigard

“There should be no hungry, undereducated, poorly housed children in Oregon, period. We have to stop waiting for the next Tom McCall, whoever he or she may be.”

State Sen. Avel Gordly

What Oregon needs is a fully integrated antipoverty plan.

The state needs to offer more than job training and referral, it must offer a coherent system of supports to self-sufficiency.

Since 1993, welfare reform has reduced the number of people receiving cash assistance in the state from 114,000 to 44,000. But all we know about the 70,000 people who left the system is that they are gone. Food banks say they've seen them in their 20 percent jump in emergency food requests since 1996, but, beyond that, nobody knows exactly where all those people went.

Then, too, sometimes the changes wrought by reform hardly seem worth it — especially if it happens to be you who is shifting from welfare to a subsistence job and coming up with a drop in income. The system often rewards those who leave welfare with penalties in such things as subsidized child care where, if you make as little as \$8 an hour, your co-payments rise sharply.

That's also true for subsidized housing and food costs. And subsidies are slow coming. Northwest Pilot Project, a nonprofit low-income housing advocacy agency says families typically wait 18-24 months for low-income housing vouchers. What happens to those families in the meantime? One thing is that instability leads to moving around, which leads to changing schools, which means a greater likelihood of receiving a poor education.

Then, of course, there is hunger. The U.S. Department of Agriculture ranked Oregon first among the states in the prevalence of hunger — defined as the "uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food; the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food."

Hunger is the canary in the mineshaft, said Patti Whitney-Wise, executive director of the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force.

Another basic is shelter, of course, but homelessness remains a gnawing issue in Oregon. A federal two-year housing study suggests that homelessness is not the consequence of some epidemic of laziness or shiftlessness.

Forty-two percent of the homeless people surveyed said what they wanted most was help in finding a job. That, at least, is something Oregon's welfare system is beginning to address.

Unfortunately that number doesn't include the people who are homeless as a direct result of mental illness.

Those people often do not qualify even for the Oregon Health Plan until they're in crisis, or are about to create a crisis. That usually means a public disturbance. Then, and only then, can they be hospitalized — or jailed — medicated, stabilized and returned to the streets.

These are tough questions, and Oregonians are understandably torn between compassion and our pioneer heritage of grit and self-reliance. But the homeless can't hightail it to the hills to eke out an existence in Forest Park. The frontiers today are in our dealings with these kinds of intractable issues.

"The demonizing of government has gone too far. We need to recognize that government is the way a civilized society takes care of collective needs," wrote Barbara Skorney of Southeast Portland.

Oregonians can help more of our neighbors on the road to self-sufficiency. The map we need is a fully integrated antipoverty plan.



On Nov. 14, we invited readers to submit essays, letters and suggestions about growth and livability; the community's social safety net; and how we ensure the safety and the futures of our children. We reviewed more than 400 letters, essays and suggestions before formulating our own editorials for the project. The first editorial in the New Oregon Century series, discussing livability, appeared last Sunday. Another, on children's issues, will appear next week. We intend to revisit the topics throughout 2000.