

OUR VIEW

Federal policy needs to support families

Family policies being decided at the federal level now will have a major effect on Americans for years to come.

This should be a bipartisan effort. There are plenty of Republicans and Democrats alike who understand how child tax credits, support for child care centers and universal preschool could have a huge positive effect on their constituents — not just families with young children, but also on business owners who depend on a strong workforce.

The lack of affordable child care and the serious shortage of child care in general are keeping parents out of the workforce, discouraging couples from having children and hurting the economy. This is a long-standing problem exacerbated by the pandemic.

When parents can find and afford quality child care and preschool for their children, they are free to work or continue their education and job training.

Child tax credits for high-income families are unnecessary and expensive, but we believe child tax credits for low- and middle-income working parents to spend as they please on the best child care they can find would drive the market to create more quality child care options (both home- and center-based), and raise wages for child care providers.

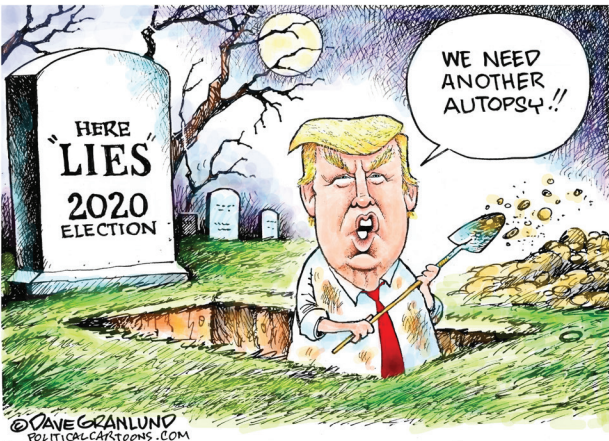
The greatest challenge for most rural communities is the demand for child care far exceeds the supply. Building child care centers is expensive because of the specific needs of infants, toddlers and preschoolers and often onerous state regulations that govern child care facilities.

Federal grants to communities to build and maintain child care centers (which then could be operated by nonprofit organizations or cooperatives, with local control) would go a long way to shrink the child care shortage.

A recent analysis shows universal preschool for 4-year-olds will save the existing taxpayer-funded K-12 public education system more than \$83 billion per year. It's clear that having young children spend three or four hours a day at a high-quality preschool — learning how to follow instructions, manage their emotions and work and play with others — means they will be ready to learn in kindergarten. The K-12 savings come from reduced need for special education and grade repetition.

We want to see Republicans and Democrats working together to allow parents to have choices about child care and preschool, to support low- and middle-income families for whom child care and preschool is currently a significant economic burden, and to encourage adults to work.

Federal policies that support marriage, children and the economy are within reach.



I became a statistic, one of the 10%



DICK HUGHES
OTHER VIEWS

A not-so-funny thing happened on my way to writing my guest column three weeks ago. I became a statistic.

I went from sitting at my laptop to being whisked by ambulance to Salem Hospital with a serious case of COVID-19 pneumonia, despite being fully vaccinated. After a week of excellent hospital care, I'm recovering at home.

Thank goodness that our daughter had insisted I buy a pulse oximeter after testing positive for COVID-19. I'd assumed mine would be a brief, mild case in line with what was being reported about the so-called breakthrough transmissions. I felt no symptoms other than an annoying cough and extreme fatigue, not realizing it was shortness of breath.

A pulse oximeter measures oxygen levels in the blood. At least 90% is desirable. The ambulance crew found mine had dropped to 40%. I apparently was in "happy hypoxia," far sicker than my outward symptoms indicated.

There are two ways of interpreting my case. One is to infer that COVID-19 vaccinations are imperfect because I fell outside the commonly quoted statistical predictions. That is true.

I prefer a second interpretation. As a nurse bluntly told me: "If you hadn't been vaccinated, you'd probably be dead. Or upstairs in the ICU on a ventilator." These days, most of those patients are ones who are unvaccinated. Too many, depending on one's individual circumstances, won't make it out alive.

Medicine is imperfect, constantly changing and adjusting as we learn more. Just last week, a federal task force reversed its 2016 recommendation that certain individuals take a

baby aspirin each day to prevent an initial heart attack or stroke.

Almost every medication or intervention carries risk. So does failure to act.

I chose to get vaccinated because the odds of serious complications or death from contracting COVID-19 are far higher than the risks from the Pfizer vaccine. But I recognize those odds are only societal averages. Statistics don't determine what will happen with any one of us.

Regardless of whatever decision one makes about being vaccinated or not, for some individuals that decision will turn out badly, leading to severe complications, even death. That is reality. None of us can know beforehand, so we must make our own calculations based on good but imperfect data.

Health officials have declared the vaccines safe. I wish they would more honestly describe vaccines as "relatively safe — safer than most drugs being promoted on TV for other conditions."

And no, the coronavirus vaccine does not cause COVID-19.

I was vaccinated in March by Oregon National Guard members and Salem firefighters at the Oregon State Fairgrounds. Research suggests the Pfizer vaccine's effectiveness in preventing infection drops sharply after six months but remains 90% effective at preventing hospitalization and death. I guess I'm one of those outliers in the 10%, although slowly improving.

Nearly 2.5 million Oregonians have been vaccinated. Infections in vaccinated individuals continue to be uncommon. Being both vaccinated and having had COVID-19, my odds of future infection are low. But I'm still going to get a vaccine booster. And return to wearing masks.

Throughout the pandemic, my wife and I faithfully followed the public health protocols. We adapted to wearing masks everywhere. We took a road trip to Klamath and Lake coun-

ties in May. Trying to fit in, we abided by the local practices, which varied by establishment. But as infections intensified this summer, I skipped my 50-year high school reunion.

Perhaps I became overconfident about my and others' vaccinations, assuming any infection would be minor. Meanwhile, the Salem area remains a statewide leader in new infections.

There is no way to tell how I got infected. It might have been my forgoing masks when gathering with vaccinated friends. Yes, masks are only partially effective but they provide one more barrier against transmission. It's all about moving the odds in one's favor.

A friend tested positive Sept. 21 after having what he thought was a mild cold. He informed us immediately. The coronavirus has so overwhelmed county health departments that it's pretty much up to individuals in the Salem area to do their own contact tracing.

Feeling puny, I arranged to get a COVID-19 test the next day, although the doctor considered a coronavirus infection unlikely. My wife also tested positive, with a mild but fatiguing case. I was constantly coughing and needing a 10-minute rest before making even the short walk from bathroom to bed.

As I sat down at my laptop to write that Thursday morning, I also contacted Kaiser Permanente for advice, providing my latest oxygen levels. The response: Call 911 immediately. Get taken to whichever hospital has room for you.

The first responders were skilled, efficient and gracious. Having covered health care for decades and being comfortable around hospitals, I felt at ease. Besides, for a journalist, every experience becomes fodder for a column.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

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