

HELEN THOMAS

The First Lady of the White House press corps talks about Obama, the press, and, oh yeah, that other guy.

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Bordering on insanity

Immigration policy denies migrants the dignified life they risk their lives to find

BY MARTHA GIES
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The border between the United States and Mexico is many things: a 2000-mile-wide stage set for the theater of the absurd, a shooting gallery for Minutemen and racist ranchers, an arid graveyard for would-be migrants who are unlucky or unprepared, a new-fashioned Berlin Wall, and a fathomless divide between rich and poor.

Parallel steel fences, 12 to 18 feet high and festooned with motion sensors, cameras and lights, form an intermittent barrier from the Pacific Ocean at San Diego to the Gulf of Mexico at Brownsville, Texas.

How you make it across that border depends on who you are. A U.S. citizen can show up at any airport on a whim and hop a flight to Cancún or Zihuatanejo with only a credit card and a passport.

But if you're Mexican and headed north, you have two choices: you can go wait in line at a U.S. Consulate — alone, mind you; you can't take anyone with you — and prove, by showing bank statements, payroll stubs, a letter from your employer, and the deed to your home, that you have every reason to return.

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PHOTO BY JOHN GIBLER



The new border wall between U.S. and Mexico at Sasabe, Sonora.

Legislature weighs individual, state needs for assistance

Advocates for the disabled and poor push for the restoration of General Assistance against a dismal state budget forecast

BY MARA GRUNBAUM
STAFF WRITER

Paying for food isn't the problem. Dinner is fried catfish — \$1.68 a pound at the discount supermarket — collard greens from a can, and cornbread made possible by a fresh jug of milk found abandoned in the library parking lot.

The problem, says 53-year-old Lynne Walker, is paying for everything else: deodorant, batteries, bedsheets, toilet paper.

Walker says her severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder make steady employment impossible. She has applied for federal disability benefits, but like many others, her case has been pending for more than two years. In the meantime, she has no significant source of income.

Until 2005, Oregon's General Assistance program paid \$314 a month to disabled citizens with little or no income while they waited for their Social Security cases to process. In 2003, the state cut General Assistance from its budget, leaving about 2,500 Oregonians who had been on the program in the lurch.

Walker receives \$175 a month in food stamps and a \$75 utility stipend from the Housing Authority of Portland, which subsidizes her one-bedroom Gresham apartment. She earns about

\$15 a month collecting cans and bottles to return for the deposit. She stretches that money as far as she can, she says, but without General Assistance, she cannot afford many basic necessities.

"Every time I use toilet paper, or every time I squirt dishes or use laundry powder, it generates anxiety — like a panic attack," Walker said. "People who are disabled can't work. How can they live from the time they're disabled until the time they get their benefits?"

Every year, 2.5 million Americans apply for disability benefits through the Social Security Administration. There are currently 4,574 new applications pending in Oregon, according to the state Department of Human Services.

To deter fraud, application procedures are stringent. Two thirds of disability claims are initially denied. Those applicants can appeal — and about a third of them do — but a massive backlog of cases means it can take two or three years before their cases are finally resolved. In December, *The Oregonian* reported that the wait time for a hearing at the Portland Social Security office is one of the longest in the country.

People with children can receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a monthly cash

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PHOTO BY MARY YAJKO

Lynne Walker, in her apartment with her dog, are hoping a new effort to restore General Assistance funding will help fill the gap while her enrollment for Social Security benefits languishes in a massive backlog.