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America in 2015: Warming the homeless

Astoria's effort to help is only a temporary fix

“Come in and get warm!” reads the sign at the Astoria Warming Center.

Approved in November by the Astoria City Council, the warming center is using space in the senior center, which is awaiting renovation, for homeless people to sleep during these freezing nights.

The shelter at Exchange and 11th streets opens when night temperatures are expected to drop below 35 degrees.

The move was spearheaded by City Councilor Drew Herzig, who deserves credit for pushing for a remedy to something that shouldn't exist in America in 2015.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness notes that the problem in the United States is decreasing, in part because of federal efforts to assist communities find ways to provide affordable housing. But no one is popping the champagne corks yet. The alliance notes that on a single night in January 2013, 610,042 people were experiencing homelessness.

That's a slight decrease from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's count a year before. But the transitory nature of homelessness has several agencies reporting that in reality more than 3 million Americans experience homelessness at some time during any given year.

Additionally, more than one in 10 of homeless Americans are military veterans. That is an unacceptable stain on our nation.

The problem is compounded by our nation's apparent unwillingness to admit that a large proportion of its population

has mental health problems that demand tax-funded solutions.

As a nation, we need to shift to a strategy whose core involves governments providing the impetus to create more private-sector affordable housing.

This needs a partnership driven by a long-term view that leaders on all sides of the political spectrum must embrace. Governments must offer access to education, especially retraining for displaced workers in our changing economy, plus support networks for the unemployed and health programs promoting wellness for all. In addition to housing, the private sector's other key contribution must be higher-paying jobs.

The Astoria center has taken over the shelter role from First Baptist Church, whose leaders and congregation generously offered their facility for such help until the city program was approved.

The center is being financed by donations made through Grace Episcopal Church with the city paying a small amount for insurance. However, the space is only available until the renovation starts sometime this year. Herzig and others will seek a new location next winter.

When reporter Derrick DePledge visited the center, more than a dozen people were using it. Our headline on his story was, “A brief refuge from the cold.”

That's all it is. We would much prefer a headline that read, “Warming Center closes because it isn't needed anymore.”

Better way to handle disputes at nation's ports

West Coast slowdown has gone on long enough

The work contract between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and Pacific Maritime Association expired July 1. Union members began a slowdown to demonstrate their unhappiness with the PMA, whose members operate container terminals on the West Coast. Ports in Longview, Wash., Portland, Seattle and Tacoma, are directly impacted by the slowdown. But our entire region feels an erosion in economic vitality.

Instead of hurting the PMA, the union has hurt agricultural exporters and other industries that import and export their goods via the ports. The result is billions of dollars in lost business. The National Association of Manufacturers and National Retail Federation estimate the port slowdown cost their members \$2 billion a day.

Washington state's apple industry is losing about \$19 million a week, according to that state's Apple Commission. That is the equivalent of 300 container loads of apples rotting each week.

The dispute is costing jobs as well as profits. A Boise, Idaho-based beef processor reports that slowdown is costing the company millions of dollars and reduced its export volume by 70 percent. As a result of the lost business, the company has had to reduce employees' hours.

Phrases such as “wreaking havoc,” “lost business” and “canceled orders” are repeated as agricultural exporters are damaged by the ILWU-created disaster on the docks.

Such damage to the nation's economy cannot be overlooked.

There is a way to prevent the union from throwing tantrums: Put the ports under the Railway Labor Act. That law bars railroad and airline unions from striking until they have gone through arbitration and mediation.

The law was passed because of the importance the railroads and the airlines have to the nation and its economy. Certainly the ports have a similar impact on the economy. It only makes sense to place them under the jurisdiction of the Railway Labor Act, too.

Here's the first pop quiz of 2015

By GAIL COLLINS
New York Times News Service

Happy New Year! Wishing you many good things in 2015.

Or at least, a better year than the one that just ended. Which seems pretty likely, all things considered.

But before we shove off into the future, let's see what you remember about 2014. Since there are a lot of quizzes at this time of year, we are going to specialize here in politics and air travel.

1. The National Rifle Association is famous for its defense of the right to carry guns. An NRA commentator demanded that the right to bear arms be extended to:

- A) Blind people.
- B) Preschoolers.
- C) Bad shots.
- D) Career criminals.

2. This year, a professor at the University of North Carolina published a study of Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign in which he determined that by the end of the race it took 22 staff members to:

- A) Keep the candidate's hair in check.
- B) Create the candidate's position on health care.
- C) Approve campaign tweets.
- D) Keep the family dog tied to the car roof.

3. The \$1.1 trillion spending package Congress passed at the end of the year was called the:

- A) Cromnibus.
- B) Enola Gay.
- C) Big Bargain.
- D) Return to Normalcy.

4. Identify the person who said, “We've had enough Bushes.”

- A) Barbara Bush on Jeb's presidential prospects.

B) George H.W. Bush on attendance at recent family reunions.

C) White House groundskeeper on the annual Foliage Census.

D) Texas Land Commissioner-elect George P. Bush on his commitment to family planning.

5. One of the year's multitudinous crises involving air passengers behaving badly came when a woman brought a pig to her seat on a plane. She claimed she needed it:

- A) To keep the man in front of her from reclining into her lap.
- B) As a conversation starter.
- C) For emotional support.
- D) As a food tester.

6. The Knee Defender is:

- A) The position John Boehner played in college football.
- B) A gadget you can stick onto the back of an airplane seat to keep your neighbor from reclining.
- C) A line of high-fashion support stockings.
- D) A member of the British royal household who accompanied Will and Kate to that basketball game in Brooklyn last month.

7. After investigations into Benghazi by the House Intelligence Committee, the House Armed Services Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the House Oversight Committee, Speaker John Boehner prepared for the new year by creating:

- A) A drinking game in which everybody has to quaff red wine whenever they hear the word “Libya.”
- B) A \$3.3 million special committee on Benghazi.
- C) A bipartisan commission on duplication of congressional investigations.



Gail Collins

D) A new tradition in which he tells reporters, “If ands and buts were candy and nuts, then every day would be Christmas.”

8. The first thing Mitch McConnell says he'll do when he becomes Senate majority leader this month is:

- A) Create a new Senate investigation into Benghazi.
- B) Finance a new Monument to Coal on the National Mall.

C) Tie up Ted Cruz and stick him in the basement.

D) Pass a bill authorizing a humongous oil pipeline.

9. Moved by their congressman's impassioned declarations of his innocence, voters in Staten Island re-elected Rep. Michael Grimm despite his multiple indictments for tax evasion. To welcome in the new year, the triumphant Grimm:

A) Apologized to a young TV reporter for threatening to throw him over the Capitol balcony.

B) Announced he was introducing a bill that would help small-business men like himself avoid being badgered by the Internal Revenue Service for no good reason.

C) Pleaded guilty to a felony tax charge.

D) Revealed he'd be starring in a reality show in which he is stranded on an island with the former congressman from Staten Island who was revealed to be hiding a second family in Virginia.

ANSWERS: 1-A (In a video titled “Firearms and the Blind,” an NRA commentator said, “It's been proven that people that lack vision have an increased awareness of their hearing and spatial surroundings.”); 2-C; 3-A; 4-A; 5-C; 6-B; 7-B; 8-D; 9-C.



Chickens huddle in their cages at an egg processing plant at the Dwight Bell Farm in Atwater, Calif. The New Year is bringing rising chicken egg prices across the country as California starts requiring farmers to house hens in cages with enough space to move around and stretch their wings.

AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez

Hens, unbound. Is this the end of cages?

By MARK BITTMAN
New York Times News Service

The most significant animal welfare law in recent history — California's Proposition 2 — takes effect today.

The measure, which passed by a landslide vote in 2008, requires egg and some meat producers to confine their animals in far more humane conditions than they did before. No longer will baby calves (veal) or gestational pigs be kept in crates so small they cannot turn around and, perhaps more significantly, egg-laying hens may not be held in “battery” cages that prevent them from spreading their wings.

The regulations don't affect only hens kept in California. In 2010, Gov.

Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law a bill that extended the protections of Proposition 2 to out-of-state birds: You cannot sell an egg in California from a hen kept in extreme confinement anywhere. For an industry that has been able to do pretty much what it wants, this is a big deal: It bans some of the most egregious practices.

Does limiting confinement for hens mean the end of cages? Maybe. It might become impractical for growers to build bigger cages; that is, it might be easier simply to keep hens in groups that meet the new minimum area required per bird and so keep the hens “cage free.” That's not a panacea, but it is an improvement.

The new minimum is not specified in numbers, but the courts have said that it “establishes a clear test that any law enforcement officer can apply, and that test does not require the law enforcement officer to have the investigative

acumen of Columbo to determine if an egg farmer is in violation.” Hens must be able to spread their wings without touching a cage or another bird.

There is, however, another new state regulation — the so-called shell egg food safety regulation, aimed at reducing salmonella — enacted by the California Department of Food and Agriculture. This requires a minimum of 116 square inches per bird, compared with the current 67 square inches, which is less space than an 8-by-10 photo and just a tad more than a standard iPad.

Proposition 2 trumps this rule, and birds probably need more than 116 square inches to spread their wings. In fact, many experts think something closer to 200 square inches is more realistic. But some farmers may think they can get away with 116; law enforcement will determine whether they're right, and noncompliance is a criminal offense.

The new regulations will probably raise the price of eggs. Surprisingly, as producers in California switch production systems to comply with the new law, eggs raised by so-called conventional means sometimes cost more than cage-free eggs. This belies the arguments that the conversion process is difficult or prohibitively expensive; it just shows that many producers failed to take advantage of the five years between the extension of the new housing standards to all birds, and its taking effect, to adequately prepare. What have they been doing instead? Predictably, filing lawsuits fighting Proposition 2, all of which have failed.

That Proposition 2 is supported by a majority of people in the country's biggest agriculture state, and that its le-



Mark Bittman

gitimacy has been supported by courts, shows the direction in which the raising of animals is headed. Gestation crates are on their way out, and battery cages will soon join them. With this measure, the table is set for similar action in states all over the country.

“We've worked on passing anti-confinement laws in 10 states now,” says Paul Shapiro, a senior director at the Humane Society of the United States. At least three other states are to take up similar legislation in 2015.

The most important part of the new law may be that every whole egg sold in California must adhere to the standards set by Proposition 2, regardless of where it's from. And since California can't raise all the eggs eaten by its citizens, millions of those eggs — perhaps as many as a third consumed in the state — will come from elsewhere. From Iowa, for example, where more than 14 billion eggs are produced each year. (Interesting: There are just over 3 million people in Iowa, and nearly 60 million laying hens.) There has been talk of shortages, but they would be short-lived.

So, in California, just as you had to meet higher emission standards than required by federal law if you wanted to sell cars, now you must meet higher welfare standards for hens if you want to sell eggs. Whether farmers comply, or disobey, or leave the business remains to be seen. But Proposition 2 means a new norm; eventually it will be, well, normal.

Just how high are the standards set by Proposition 2? “By itself, the law means that many millions of animals will no longer be held in cramped cages, and that's huge,” says Shapiro. “But the message it sends to the factory farming industry is clear: Business as usual — that is, subjecting animals to torturous conditions for their entire lives — is no longer going to be acceptable.”

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