

THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



STEPHEN A. FORRESTER, *Editor & Publisher*
 LAURA SELLERS, *Managing Editor*
 BETTY SMITH, *Advertising Manager*
 CARL EARL, *Systems Manager*
 JOHN D. BRUIJN, *Production Manager*
 DEBRA BLOOM, *Business Manager*
 HEATHER RAMSDELL, *Circulation Manager*

Attention must be paid to rural white women

Their death rate is startling

Middle-aged white women in places like Tillamook County are dying long before they should — a reversal in decades of improving life expectancy in the U.S.

Delving into government and academic data, *The Washington Post* this Sunday published a deeply troubling look at how addictions, depression and other factors cut decades from the lifespans of women, especially in America's countryside and small towns.

"From 1990 through 2014, the mortality rate for white women rose in most parts of the country, particularly around small cities and in rural areas. Rates often went up by more than 40 percent and, in some places, doubled," the *Post* reported.

Along the economically privileged West Coast, Tillamook County is the only county in the worst quartile of excess death rates — above 40 percent. Clatsop County is comparatively much better off, in the lowest quartile with premature mortality of up to 12.5 percent. Just to our north, Pacific County, Wash., has an early death rate in the range of 12.5 to 25 percent.

According to the *Post*, for every 100,000 women in their late 40s living in U.S. rural areas, 228 died in the year 2000. "Today, 296 are dying," the *Post* reports. "And in rural areas, the uptick in mortality was noticeable even earlier, as far back as 1990. Since then, death rates for rural white women in midlife have risen by nearly 50 percent."

This "corrosion of American health" is driven by several factors, chief

among these being rising rates of opioid and heroin addiction, alcoholism and related diseases like cirrhosis of the liver, suicide, smoking and obesity. The suicide rate has more than doubled for rural white women ages 50 to 54, for example.

These deaths of all varieties are an end result of unique downward spirals of illness, often tied to poverty and absence of much to feel optimistic about. "There are millions of people underneath these (death statistics) who are in pain," one expert said.

Separate research published Monday in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* finds a stronger-than-ever connection between low incomes and unhealthy lifestyle choices when it comes to living longer. This research discovered that local attitudes and policy choices can have a substantial positive impact. The Way to Wellville program in Clatsop County may demonstrate how an accumulation of good-living decisions can influence health outcomes — though it appears Tillamook County might have benefited more from such a campaign.

The infamous "Rural-Urban Divide" sometimes only seems like a rhetorical tool ginned up by the political hate-meisters of talk radio. However, there is legitimate pain on America's back roads. Attention must be paid.

FYI: Clippings from the press of the Pacific Northwest and the nation

Another blow to USPS

Too bad the federal government can't wage war on drugs or poverty as effectively as it has against the U.S. Postal Service. Congress keeps coming up with inventive ways to cripple the Postal Service financially — with the latest coming Sunday, when a mandatory rate cut took effect.

If left in place, the cut will cost the Postal Service \$2 billion a year, crippling its ability to adapt to new competition and technology.

The Postal Service lost money during the Great Recession. So to close the budgetary gap the Postal Regulatory Commission, the independent regulatory agency that oversees postal services and rates, approved a rate increase in 2014.

The increase boosted the price of a first-class stamp to 49 cents from 46 cents. The commission also required that the increase be rescinded once it generated \$4.6 billion in revenue.

The Postal Service hit the \$4.6 billion target Sunday. The Postal Service is allowed to take inflation into account in calculating the rollback, so the price

of a first-class stamp will be cut to 47 cents.

It will be the first time since 1919 that the price of a stamp has declined.

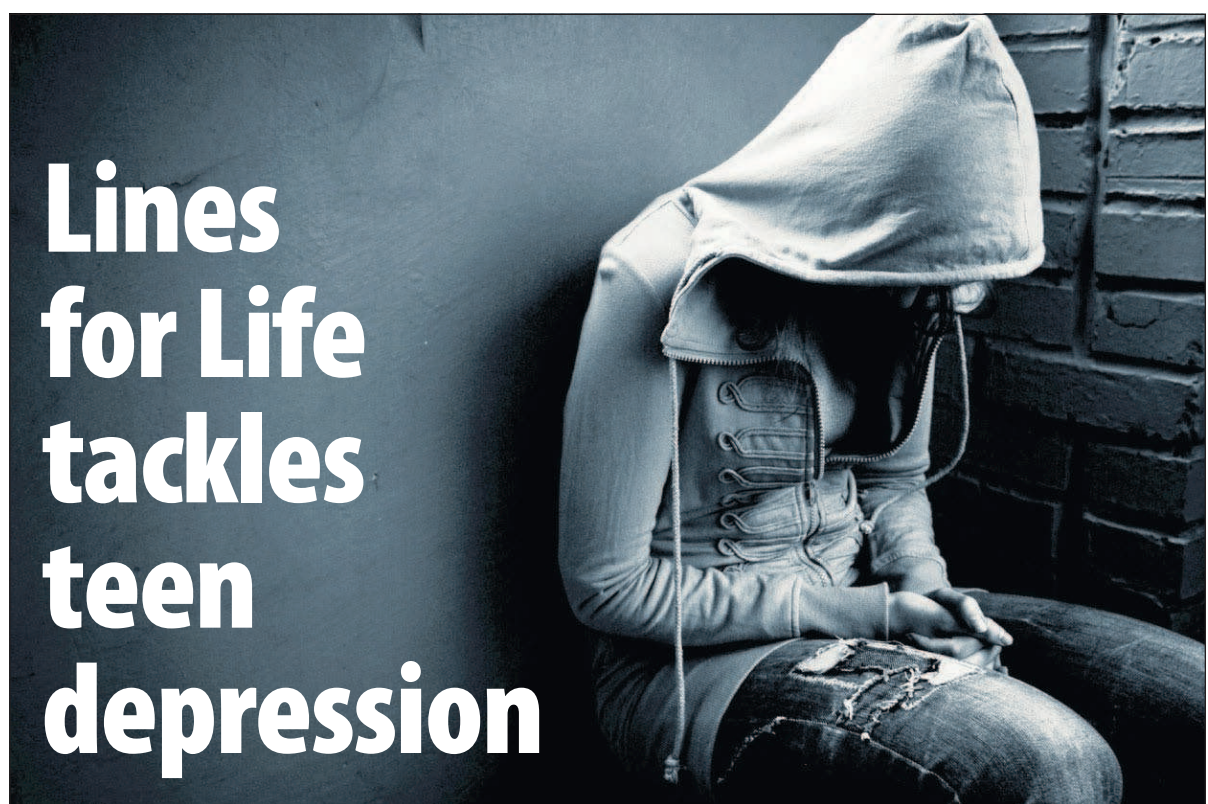
Despite the proliferation of alternatives, the Postal Service remains the only truly universal delivery system in the country. For 49 cents (or 47 cents, as of today), it will deliver a letter from any address to any address, whether it's in Marcola or Manhattan. The availability of such a service binds the nation, lubricates the channels of communication and creates a democratic equality among urban and rural areas.

But now comes another \$2 billion blow. Americans don't need the extra pennies — indeed, the rate cut makes those fixed-price "forever" stamps in millions of kitchen drawers worth a bit less.

Congress should allow the Postal Service to charge a break-even price for its services rather than needlessly pushing it toward insolvency. Surely, it's in no one's interest to force an essential public service to fail.

— *The Register-Guard, Eugene*

GUEST COLUMN



By LINDA BERGER, HEATHER HUMMELL-MARTIN and DONNA CARSON
Of Astoria Middle School

To Astoria Middle School parents or guardians: The teen years are marked by a roller coaster ride of emotions making it difficult for teens, their parents, and educators. It is easy to misread depression as normal adolescent turmoil; however, depression (among the most common of mental illnesses) appears to be occurring at a much earlier age, and the past decade has seen teen suicide rates double.

Our school community is experiencing an increase in the reported number of students engaging in self-harm behaviors, and we want to share a proactive plan to help students be safer. This involves pulling together as parents, school, and the community to begin the conversation to address how our students/children are doing.

In order to proactively address this issue, Astoria Middle School is partnering with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare to review programs and plans which can be most useful in our setting. They have connected us with Lines For Life, who will bring in trainers to review best practices for interacting with students who are in crisis, anxious, depressed, who may be using or considering self-harm behaviors or are suicidal.

Friday, Monday and today, Lines for Life visited student classrooms (one day

'Our school community is experiencing an increase in the reported number of students engaging in self-harm behaviors.'

for each grade level) and discussed with students how to make healthy choices. Our goal is to increase help-seeking by students if they are worried about themselves or a friend in crisis, harming themselves or feeling suicidal. We want students to understand what they are feeling and provide them with strategies for dealing with their concerns.

There will be an opportunity for parents to join us and learn about community supports available. This will take place at Astoria Middle School. You are encouraged to attend an informational meeting that will include a panel for questions and answers. It will be from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. today and Wednesday. The focus will be on community resources and useful advice about helping a child who is in crisis. It is critical that our community of parents, school, and public agencies come together with a commitment to our children. Together we can support our children and prevent a tragedy.

Some students may be aware of problems that haven't yet been shared with an adult at home or school. They may be worried what will happen if they share fears about themselves or their friends. You can be most helpful by showing you care, listening care-



Linda Berger

fully, and being genuine.

What can you say? "I'm concerned about you ... about how you feel."

It is OK (often very helpful) to be very direct and nonjudgmental. You can ask, "Are you thinking about suicide?"

It is also important to get help. "You aren't alone. I will get you the help you need."

If your child is suicidal, don't leave him or her alone. If your child is not suicidal, it is still important to ask about whether they have been injuring or harming themselves and when they last did this. Check for signs of cuts, bruises, or other injuries. Remove or lock up items your child could use for suicide or self-harm.

You can call Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare to arrange for an emergency screening if your child is suicidal or self-harming (503-325-0241), or request that screening at the hospital emergency room. Lines for Life crisis line can be reached at 800-273-8255.

You are welcome to call us if you have questions at 503-325-4331.

Linda Berger is the principal at Astoria Middle School, Heather Hummell Martin is the assistant principal and Donna Carson is a counselor.

A Mason-Dixon line of progress

By TIMOTHY EGAN
New York Times News Service

Inside the ancient town hall of Siena, Italy, the walls hold a series of magnificent 14th-century frescoes showing the effects of good government and bad.

One side depicts a prosperous city-state, where justice and tolerance prevail in the Tuscan countryside.

The other is ruled by a horned, fanged figure, the streets deserted and scary.

We saw our own version of this allegory with the two Americas this week — one going backward, the other stepping into tomorrow. We saw a retreat to bigotry in states dooming themselves to decline. And in other states, we saw a way for people to get around a do-nothing Congress controlled by Know-Nothing throwbacks.

First, the good. On Monday, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo signed a bill that will eventually raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, lifting the earnings of 2.3 million New Yorkers, and he authorized one of the strongest paid parental leave laws in the nation. On the same day, Gov. Jerry Brown of California put his signature to a \$15 minimum wage plan in the most populous state. And San Francisco became the first place in the country to require businesses to provide paid leave for new parents.

What had seemed impossible just a few years ago is now rolling through cities and states led by forward-looking politicians. Together, these changes amount to a "revolution in the workplace," as one exultant activist put it. But let's not get too excited: The United States remains the only developed country in the world that does not mandate paid parental leave.

Now the bad. Following North Carolina's lead, another state, Mississippi, passed a law allowing people and institutions to deny services to gay people. With this measure, Mississippi, already one of the poorest states in the nation, ensures that

good job providers will stay away.

Indeed, PayPal dropped plans to bring 400 jobs to North Carolina after politicians gave people a green light to discriminate, and Bruce Springsteen just canceled a concert there for the same reason. And corporate leaders signed a letter Wednesday, expressing disgust. "Such laws are bad for employees," the representatives of companies ranging from Whole Foods to General Electric wrote, "and bad for business."

Next door, in Alabama, the embattled Republican governor signed a bill earlier this year preventing cities from raising the minimum wage. This after Birmingham dared to dream of a day when its lowest-paid workers could make \$10 an hour.

Discrimination, as they see it, is just another term for religious freedom.

Nearly all the states with the highest percentage of minimum-wage workers — full-time jobholders making \$290 a week, before taxes — are in the South. These are also the same states that refuse to expand Medicaid to allow the working poor to get health care. And it's in the same cradle of the old Confederacy where discriminatory bills are rising. Don't blame the cities; from Birmingham to Charlotte, people are trying to open doors to higher wages and tolerance of gays, only to be rebuffed at the state level.

Essentially, this Republican-controlled block has decided that it's better to be poor, sick and bigoted than prosperous, healthy and open-minded. And its defense is precisely that: The region is too economically



Timothy Egan

distressed and socially backward to accept progress, so why change? Discrimination, as they see it, is just another term for religious freedom.

Raising the minimum wage is not a panacea, as Brown noted. But he called it a moral imperative, one that will allow full-time workers at the low end to better provide for their children. In California and New York, the new laws have flexibility, either by region, or size of business, or during the phase-in period.

Good companies feel the same way. Costco just announced that it would raise entry-level wages to \$13.50 an hour — at a cost to stockholders of a penny a share in the current quarter. One penny. Twitter will soon start giving full-time employees 20 weeks of paid parental leave.

Lifting wages for low-end workers and bringing the United States into the 21st century on family leave should be no-brainers. And yet, Congress refuses to move on President Barack Obama's call for paid parental leave for federal employees, and will not raise the minimum wage beyond the paltry \$7.25 an hour.

Still, people are blowing past the obstructionists. Since Obama first called on Congress to move forward on wages, in 2013, 18 states and at least 40 cities have acted on their own. Expect to see family leave laws ripple across the land as well.

"The nation is alive from the bottom up," Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom of California told my colleague Thomas Fuller. "For all the disproportionate focus on Washington, D.C., there's a whole other America out there, and it should give pause to the pessimists."

Now, maybe paying the working poor a little more will be a job-killer, as Republicans assert. Maybe mandating parental leave will inhibit business startups. Sure. If you believe doing nothing, in the wake of 20 years of declining wages and a harder quality of life, is better than doing something, this is your home: the geography of despair.