



Opinion

The Portland Observer

USPS 959-680
Established 1970

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POSTMASTER:

Send address changes to

Portland Observer

PO Box 3137

Portland, OR 97208

Periodical Postage
paid in Portland, OR

Subscriptions are
\$60.00 per year

DEADLINES
FOR ALL SUBMITTED MATERIALS:

ARTICLES:

Monday by 5 P.M.

ADS:

Friday by noon

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Black History Month

Are entry level jobs better than welfare?

By SANDIE HORACK
ADMINISTRATOR OF AES

In an election year it's common for political candidates to ask, "Are you better off than you were before?"

Increasingly, the states are asking this question of former welfare recipients who have gone to work.

When University of Oregon researchers surveyed Oregonians who had moved from welfare to work, 97 percent said they were better off.

Although this is good news, it's also true that a good share of these people continue to struggle financially. Incredibly, though, some people have used this fact to suggest that Oregon welfare reform isn't working. They even imply that people were better off on welfare than they are in those first entry-level jobs, which are a big step toward economic independence.

Let's set the record straight. Begin with income: On welfare, cash assistance and food stamps for a family of three is \$9,552, which means they live in extreme poverty.

Now, if this family's breadwinner accepts a full-time job even at minimum wage of \$6.50 an hour, annual spendable income (after taxes and child-care expenses) rises to \$17,376 from paychecks, food stamps and a tax credit.

Granted, even after going to work this family is still poor. But no fair-minded person would suggest that a family dependent on \$9,552 a year in public assistance is better off than a working family with \$17,376.

Moreover, the typical Oregonian moving from welfare to work today starts not at minimum wage, but at \$7.45 an hour. More than one in four start at \$8 an hour or more.

And that first job gives them an

opportunity to move up. An independent study by the state Employment Department shows that after 12 months on the job, former welfare recipients who are still working typically earn \$9.03 an hour.

Although government can help people out of poverty, experts increasingly recognize this isn't enough. In a recent article, Oregon State University Professor Clara Pratt pointed to the need for a coordinated strategy that takes into account the many reasons for poverty. One school of thinking lays a key cause of poverty at the door of unaffordable housing costs.

Nevertheless, when Oregonians move from welfare to work, we measure our effectiveness in part by how well they improve their circumstances.

We know that the initial six months on that first job are critical. So we offer job coaching as well as helping people new to employment ensure that their child-care and transportation arrangements work.

We offer staffed resource rooms where people can look up job openings, work on resumes, brush up on interview skills, use a phone and seek job-hunting advice.

This is in addition to at least a year's Oregon Health Plan eligibility, help with child-care costs, a federal tax credit, and food stamps for those who qualify.

The 1980s welfare office mostly determined whether people qualified for a welfare check. In 2000 it has become an employment office that not only helps people find a job, but also helps them climb the income ladder. This explains not only why they answer "yes" to the question of whether they are better off, but also why they have real hope of doing much better.

A bad bill on dying

BY U.S. SENATOR RON WYDEN
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

The House last year used a seemingly hard-to-oppose cause, pain relief for the dying to camouflage and pass a bill that essentially over-ruled Oregon's controversial law-legalized assisted suicide. Now the Senate may take up the ill conceived, misleading bill named Pain Relief Promotion Act. One can have serious qualms about legalizing assisted suicide, as we do, and still object to Congress's repeated efforts to reverse a State's legitimate attempt to find its own way on a contentious and troubling subject. Oregon's law, the only one in the nation, was upheld by referendum and has survived court challenge and a previous effort by Congress to get it directly. That earlier bill, which would have authorized the Drug Enforcement Agency to impose heavy criminal penalties on any doctor who administered a lethal dose of any controlled substance, failed once to

became clear that it would block not just drug dosages intended as lethal but the entire neighborhood gray area of drugs administered to the dying to make them more comfortable.

This year's bill purports to fix the problems by limiting penalties to drugs prescribed "with the intent" to cause death. (It also allocates money for palliative care.) But the fix doesn't work. Doctors who treat the dying say the line is inevitably fuzzy between a dose that hastens death and one that merely eases it; doctors

(or nurses or pharmacists) afraid of criminal sanctions would be deterred not just from former but from the latter as well.

The Senate version of the bill has been delayed because it was assigned, apparently by mistake, to two different committees, Labor and Human Resources and Judiciary Chairmen-Sen. James Jeffords and Orrin Hatch are expected to take very different approaches to making it up. The snafu offers an opportunity to drop the whole thing.

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Have Your Opinions heard. Send them to The Portland

Making black history

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

It is African American History Month—a time when all Americans, not just African Americans—can celebrate and learn more about the many and varied contributions of African American to this nation. Until we all come to know those contributions. We who are African Americans will continue to be erased—as in the case of the Tulsa race riot, which was all but erased from the collective memory of Oklahomans and all Americans.

In other instances, our African American children do not know the stories of the people upon whose shoulders they stand.

Birmingham Civil Right Institute
The people of Birmingham, Al are determined that future generations will know their own history and know of the many sacrifices which African Americans in Birmingham and throughout the South made. Thus, in the 1980's Mayor Richard Arrington put together a committee to develop the Birmingham Civil Right institute. Odessa Woolfolk became the head of that planning committee Odessa Woolfolk was born and raised in Birmingham. Her mother was a school teacher and her father a craftsman. A product of the Birmingham public school system, she went to nearby Talladega College and then returned to her hometown as a teacher herself. Eight years later she moved to upstate New York and spent time at Yale University, the University of Chicago and Occidental College in Los Angeles while earning her master's degree in urban studies. Then in 1972 she returned to the University of Alabama at Birmingham. When the mayor tapped her to lead the planning for the new museum, she agreed, believing that "Birmingham needed to not run away from the issues that had been so crippling to us in the past," adding, we needed to accept our history as history. "And we had to show people we were better than our history." Led by young people across the South. It puts the civil rights movement of the U.S. in the larger context of the struggle for human rights around the world. It tells the story of many unknown people who stood up to the powerful forces of evil so that African Americans would have the opportunity to vote, to eat and drink and be educated along side their white counterparts.

Odessa Woolfolk understood that history and worked to make sure that young African Americans and others would know that history too. Now eight years after the opening of the Civil Rights Institute, she can be proud of her contribution to making sure that African American history of struggle would not be lost. She understood that the best way to honor Black History is to make some—and in her case, the making was in the telling. Thanks, Mrs. Woolfolk.

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