

OPINION

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Struggling Workers in Difficult Times

Recession hits poor, young most

By JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Despite what some would have us believe, America is not headed toward a recession; it is in the throes of one.

Most of us have, at some level, been impacted by this economic downturn. Many live in fear downsizing as businesses look for ways to save money.

Hundreds of thousands have already lost their jobs. If they're lucky, they have the job skills needed to secure new employment; but even then the wait for a new job may be long and they



may be forced to take a pay cut.

Most low-skilled workers and young people, however, are not so lucky and are having the hardest time finding even entry-level jobs.

They are hardest hit by this recession and the U.S. government needs to step in and offer them some relief.

Recent statistics show that, in the last year, the number of working 16- to 19-year-olds fell by 8 percent. That's the largest drop in any age group. The industries that usually hire them - retail, for

example - are struggling in this economy and job opportunities are scarce.

Add to this the fact that many recent college graduates are now

The American government must throw a life line to those at risk of going under.

forced to take any job, even those that don't require a degree, just to earn a paycheck, and you have a situation where young unskilled workers are competing against degreed applicants for low-wage jobs. Black males in their late teens

or early twenties are the hardest hit of all the struggling young job seekers.

Labor workers are also having a hard time in the job market.

Construction workers, especially, are finding it hard to secure employment. The industry has a nearly 11 percent unemployment rate, compared with 6.1 percent just a year ago.

The national unemployment

rate for all workers is 6.5 percent. Entry level laborers have a difficult time getting their foot in the door in these industries as more experienced workers, mirroring the experiences of recent college graduates, are snapping up lower paying jobs in an effort to stay employed.

It's a given that a recession will impact some sections of society more than others. Without the necessary assets to cushion your fall during a volatile economy or the skills to maintain employment, an individual is sure to fill the effects of this downward economic spiral.

But some groups are more vulnerable than others. And the

American government must throw a life line to those at risk of going under.

While Congress and the financial industry considers strategies for bailing out mortgage owners in the midst of the U.S. housing crisis, they should also think through ways to provide a safety net to our low-wage, unskilled and young workers.

There are a few things that can be done: extending unemployment benefits is one of them. Increasing food stamp benefits to poor families is another. With some thought and effort, the U.S. can deliver a plan that truly supports our struggling workers during this difficult time.

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Fired Up and Ready to Go

Goals to end poverty are achievable

By CHARLES SHEKETOFF

The morning after the election, I watched a video of Barack Obama telling how, on a rainy morning last June, Edith Childs of Greenwood, South Carolina, energized a room full of people with her chant, "Fired up! Ready to go!" The chant became a signature of the Obama campaign.

With the chant still echoing in my head, I turned to a blog post by an advocate I've admired for years, John Bouman, president of the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law.

Noting that "the State of Poverty is America's most populated state -- 37 million people," the Shriver Center recommended a 12-point plan to confront poverty.

In reading over the plan, I realized how relevant it is not just to

the new Obama administration but also to the new Oregon Legislature.

About one in eight Oregonians today lives below the federal poverty line, the same share as 40 years ago. If assembled in one place, Oregon's poor would comprise the state's second largest city, bigger than Eugene and Salem combined.

Those numbers may seem de-

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pressing, but the Shriver Center's plan got me fired up and ready to go. Here's the 12-point plan and the steps Oregon can take to tackle them:

Strengthen the Legal Foundation for Civil Rights and Racial Justice. Improving access to law-

yers for our poor would help strengthen the legal foundation for civil rights and racial justice.

Establish Affordable Quality Health Care for All. The legislature should breathe life back into the Oregon Health Plan so that it can get closer to its goal of coverage for all working poor adults. Add to that expanding coverage to all Oregon children and we would at least be making progress

toward affordable health coverage for all.

Guarantee Economic Safety for People with Employment Challenges. Oregon's unemployment insurance system needs to be

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Justice, Equality and Opportunity

A new direction for the Supreme Court

By KATHYRN KOLBERT

Now that election season is finally over, Americans are left to examine the results and ask: What does it all mean? Among other things, it means a new direction for our Supreme Court. And that's a very big deal.

It's incontrovertible that on Nov. 4, voters delivered a sweeping mandate for Barack Obama to appoint federal judges who are committed to core constitutional values: justice, equality, and opportunity for all.

The public rejected the efforts of the right wing to stack the federal courts with ideological jurists like Justices Anton Scalia and Samuel Alito - often called "strict constructionists."

Rather, the public selected now President-elect Obama after his repeated commitment to support compassionate judges who are faithful to the Constitution, its values, its principles and its history.

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In past years, we've seen Republican candidates motivate their base with pledges to appoint judges to the bench who bring a conservative political ideology to their decisions. This year, it was progressives who were most able to rally support on judicial issues.

Exit polling made clear that the Supreme Court was a winning issue for Obama. Voters who said the Supreme Court was a factor in their votes broke for Obama 53 to 45. Voters who said that the Supreme Court was the most important factor provided Obama an even more lopsided victory - 57 to 41.

Throughout the primary election and into the general, Sen. John McCain repeatedly focused attention on his support of George W. Bush's nominees to the Supreme Court, and promised to appoint similar jurists should he be elected.

For his part, Sen. Obama spoke about the court during the campaign with more energy than any Democratic candidate in recent memory. Lilly Ledbetter, the victim of a particularly egregious decision authored by Justice Alito, had a prime-time speaking slot at the Democratic National Convention in Denver and was also featured in a campaign ad in heavy rotation. In the vice presidential debate, Joe Biden, unprompted, pointed to his opposition to Robert Bork as an important milestone in his career.

Late in the campaign, Gov. Sarah Palin and other conservative activists attempted to discredit Senator Obama over comments he made on the Warren Court, pointing out how limited the court's decisions really were. But the allegations never caught fire, and the line of attack was completely discarded.

Americans made clear that they are comfortable with Sen. Obama's vision for the judiciary, even when it was caricatured as extreme or outside the mainstream. At the same time, voters were uninspired by Sen. McCain's frequent repetition of right-wing code words like "judicial restraint" and "strict constructionist."

In fact, the difference between the candidates' stances on the future of the Supreme Court was an important distinction in several key endorsements. In his endorsement of Sen. Obama on Meet the Press, Colin Powell pointed to the court, stating, "I would have difficulty with two more conservative appointments to the Supreme Court, but that's what we'd be looking at in a McCain administration."

Similarly, at the Democratic National Convention both Al Gore and Hillary Clinton discussed the Supreme Court as a critical reason to support Sen. Obama's candidacy.

Meanwhile, dozens of newspaper and magazine editorial boards pointed to judicial appointments as a crucial issue in their endorsements of Barack Obama.

In the next four years, there might be three or more vacancies on the Supreme Court, along with numerous vacancies on the lower federal courts.

Given the results of the election, we should expect President-elect Obama and the United States Senate to nominate and confirm judges who will defend our personal freedoms and ensure that every person has equal access to justice. The American people have asked them to do just that.

Kathryn Kolbert is president of People for the American Way.