

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

‘Opportunity gap’ for Oregon’s kids hurts all of us

At its best, America is a nation where every individual has opportunities to get an education, to find work, to support oneself and their family, and be a contributing member of this great democratic society.

By many measures, Oregon’s economy is booming. The unemployment rate in Oregon is low, more Oregonians are working, wages are up and household incomes are on the rise.

And yet, these gains are not spread equitably in this growing economy. The neighborhood where a person is born, their family’s economic circumstances, and their race or ethnicity are the most reliable indicators of future success or failure.

Today, half of Oregon’s kids are born into low-income families. Most will stay poor throughout their lives. In most Oregon counties, less than half of kids born into low-income families will ever reach middle class.

Too many kids are coming up against what the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) refers to as the “Opportunity Gap”—lack of access to stable housing, quality education, support systems and connections to people from different socioeconomic backgrounds that provide a foundation for kids to learn more, gain new skills, achieve optimal health and get needed experiences to succeed over the long term.

When kids fall behind in school, they are more likely to drop out. When drop-out rates remain high, Oregon companies struggle to find skilled workers they need to fill jobs.

When businesses can’t grow — particularly those businesses that are vital to small and rural communities — tax revenues decline, reducing our ability to invest in schools and quality education.



KATHRYN BROWN
COMMENT

The result is a self-reinforcing downward spiral that impacts the well-being of our cities, towns, rural areas and ultimately, the state.

The good news: In some places, strategic investment mixed with the input of innovative local leaders is bridging Oregon’s opportunity gap. Community engagement is a key ingredient to these successes.

An OCF report, ‘Tracking Oregon’s Progress (TOP): Oregonians Mobilizing for Change,’ highlights examples that show how community-led problem-solving is delivering tangible results.

OCF convenes local leaders, governments and nonprofits to work together and invest in community-driven solutions that work. OCF’s statewide reach helps scale solutions from one community to another facing similar challenges.

Oregon Community Foundation is

focused on creating more opportunity for communities across our state by:

- supporting affordable housing,
- providing parents with support and education to help them raise healthy kids,
- fostering small businesses in rural areas, and
- getting more kids into early childhood education.

Since 1973, OCF has helped donors improve the lives of Oregonians, and has learned that lifting local voices gets to solutions that work. OCF distributes more than \$100 million in donated dollars annually. They work with businesses, nonprofits, governments and individuals across Oregon, ensuring that no matter where in the state a child is born, their path to a successful life is clear.

Kathryn B. Brown is a member of OCF’s Eastern Oregon Leadership Council. She is publisher of The Other Oregon and is vice president of EO Media Group.

YOUR VIEWS

Where did money for veterans go?

For 99.99% of Americans, when Korea is mentioned they say, “Oh yah, my uncle or father or brother fought in Korea in 1953 or in 1950.” They never say, “My father or uncle or brother fought in Korea during the Vietnam War,” because the American public never knew how dangerous it was in Korea nor how cold and wet and miserable our troops were during the time when young men and women were going to Vietnam and coming home shot up, suffering PTSD or a traumatic brain injury and would never be the same.

Nobody will ever know what the parents of those young men and women who were killed while serving in South Korea, who got killed in an ambush or killed when their plane went down, were told about how they died. Almost certainly it wasn’t the truth, that they were killed from being ambushed by enemy forces.

Vets who served in Korea during the Vietnam War faced another challenge when they got older and needed help. They had no way of proving that they got hurt or that their cancer, diabetes or heart condition was caused by toxic chemical exposure because when they wrote for their 201 files they were sorely disappointed at what they got.

Furthermore when they wrote for After Action Review Reports or for the records of where what was sprayed, they got nothing back because the records weren’t where they were supposed to be. Sound familiar? Well it should, because if you want to hide the fact that you did something or something happened, you either keep them hidden away where nobody can get them or you simply shred them so no one’s the wiser.

What I want to know is where the money went to compensate these vets with no records? Congress gave it to DoD in the early 1980s; what did they do with it?

It is time, since we have a slew of new congressmen and senators, that we demand that they initiate an investigation into where the money went and why it wasn’t used for the purpose it was appropriated for. We all know it’s the money game and it’s who’s going to blink first, the vet or the government, and some of the vets at hearing that records they know were made are not available are talking about a class action lawsuit to bring this out in the open.

Barbara Ann Wright
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OTHER VIEWS

Problems at DHS have gone on long enough

The Oregonian

Time and again, the leaders of Oregon’s Department of Human Services vow to do better to protect children in foster care. After news articles or lawsuits reveal abuse, deplorable living conditions or deaths of foster children, DHS’ top managers appear before legislators assuring them they’ll adjust practices to ensure that such lapses don’t occur again.

But inevitably, they do. DHS and child-welfare leaders are replaced, new appointees take the helm and the dysfunctional cycle starts again. The agency’s broken system persists, cemented in place by an immutable culture, as even the most well-intentioned caseworkers, agency heads — and governors — come and go.

And here we are again. As *The Oregonian*/OregonLive and Oregon Public Broadcasting have reported in recent months, the agency has been shipping abused and neglected children to converted juvenile jails and out-of-state institutions with controversial practices. The kids aren’t receiving adequate counseling, education or services and have little, if any, contact with Oregon caseworkers. And the agency has continued its long-standing pattern of obscuring, misstating and withholding information from the public about how well, or poorly, it is doing its job.

Accountability isn’t going to come from the system we have in place — and likely not under a new advisory board that Gov. Kate Brown announced last week. And that’s why Oregon’s leaders should swallow their pride and welcome the federal lawsuit filed against them that seeks to represent Oregon’s 8,000 foster kids. Instead of fighting the suit, the state should work with the plaintiffs on a settlement that maps out specific, measurable and enforceable reforms that can finally, effectively repair Oregon’s foster-care system.

The complaint, filed by foster-care nonprofit A Better Childhood and Disability Rights Oregon, doesn’t seek monetary damages. Rather, they want a judge to require the state to fulfill its obligations to foster children under federal law. Among other things, they want the state to conduct individualized assessments of foster children, provide them with counseling and other

needed services, and develop a plan for a permanent home. They seek a court order requiring the state to hire an adequate number of caseworkers to keep workloads at a manageable level so they can provide the attention, care and follow-up that foster children need. And they want the state to develop a plan for recruiting, training and retaining a sufficient network of foster and adoptive families who can provide safe homes for children entering the system.

These are not outlandish goals. They are what many Oregonians would expect that DHS’ Child Welfare division would already be doing and match the agency’s own objectives. But DHS, now under its fourth interim or permanent director in four years, struggles to hire and train enough caseworkers, remains woefully short of suitable foster families and has been overwhelmed for so long that it can’t even recognize how broken it is.

THE AGENCY HAS BEEN SHIPPING ABUSED AND NEGLECTED CHILDREN TO CONVERTED JUVENILE JAILS AND OUT-OF-STATE INSTITUTIONS WITH CONTROVERSIAL PRACTICES.

But anyone who sees the lawsuit does. There’s the 7-year-old girl who has been in five different foster homes in less than two months, separated from her brother and dropped off at a home with lice so bad, her head was shaved. Or the boy whose reports of being sexually abused by a relative went uninvestigated by DHS for years, even as he defecated on himself repeatedly as a defense mechanism. Or the 9-year-old girl who was shipped out of Oregon to a Montana facility, effectively abandoned by Oregon caseworkers and regularly injected with a “chemical restraint” to calm her down.

“We’re traumatizing these children more,” said Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, whose stalwart advocacy for children has helped close some of the gaps in foster-care policies and who has pressed DHS relentlessly on its practice of institutionalizing foster kids. She decried a general lack of urgency, noting that agency leaders are focused more on long-term goals than addressing that a 9-year-old is spending her childhood alone and in misery.

That lack of urgency has extended on up to the governor’s office until recently. Just a year ago, after the Secretary of State’s office released a scathing audit about the foster-care system, her spokesman, Chris Pair, dismissed it as “just about politics.” It was only after her Republican opponent, Knute Buehler, called for a \$50 million investment and a “rapid improvement team” to carry out reforms in DHS, that she sought less than a third of that from the Legislature with no plan for a team.

And while news stories about the state shipping kids out of Oregon have been coming out for months, it was not until Thursday, two days after the lawsuit was filed, that Brown announced a new child-welfare board and a crisis management team to advise her in overseeing the agency and implementing reforms.

A court judgment or settlement requiring the state to hire an adequate number of case workers instantly elevates child welfare as a funding priority for the governor and the Legislature. A court-ordered monitor overseeing whether DHS is providing individualized assessments of foster care children within 60 days brings a level of accountability that can’t easily be brushed aside. And Oregon could follow the lead of Tennessee, which had also been sued by A Better Childhood and is now lauded for the improvements it has made in its system. There is an opportunity that comes when you finally admit the need for help.

As the lawsuit notes, “the problems in the Oregon foster care system have been exhaustively documented for well over a decade. It is time that Oregon is held accountable.”

These kids have been waiting and waiting for someone to hold the state accountable. Oregon leaders should not pass up this opportunity to do so.