

# Opinion

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

# DHS conceals progress

Editorial from *The (Bend) Bulletin*:

What a terrible time for the Oregon Department of Human Services to conceal what it's doing to improve foster care.

The state has paid out millions in settlements for failing to ensure the children in its care were safe. An Oregon Secretary Of State audit found in January that DHS has been "slow, indecisive, and inadequate" in fixing recurring problems in the foster care system.

To its credit, DHS pledged to address all 24 of the audit's recommendations for improvement. The agency wrote it would cultivate the "need for transparency, strong and open communication." DHS published on its website some updates on its progress, though it didn't address all 24.

When we asked for a more comprehensive update in mid-April, DHS was slow and inadequate. DHS staff went to considerable effort to write a more comprehensive memo for *The Bulletin* to update the public about its progress. But DHS did not release it. To get it, (*The Bulletin*) had to compel its release under state public records law. That's the DHS idea of transparency?

Internal DHS emails show the agency's leadership was more worried about how the information might be seen than being open with the public about what it was doing. Jay Remy, who was the head of public information at DHS at the time, wrote on May 9 he was worried releasing a response might surprise Gov. Kate Brown's office or the Secretary of State's Office. He advocated delay.

Jeannine Beatrice, chief of staff at DHS, responded: "If we push it off, we need to get something on line that shows progress... as we promised in many communications that we would be transparent going forward."

"I agree," replied DHS Director Fariborz Pakseresh.

Remy then added in an email on May 10 that Kate Kondayan, who worked in Gov. Kate Brown's office, wanted to hold off releasing anything and roll it into a media campaign. That's not transparency; that's control. DHS never told us why it would not give us a comprehensive update. We got tired of waiting and made a public records request on May 21 for emails related to our request for information.

That's how we got those internal emails and the release of the memo. DHS didn't even get our public records request right. Under state law, DHS had 15 days to give us a reasonable estimate about when our records request would be completed. We never got that. The episode with DHS is a good lesson in why Oregon needs strong public records laws. All the government talk of transparency can be a charade.

## Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.

**Mail:** To the Editor, Baker City Herald,  
P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814  
**Email:** news@bakercityherald.com

## CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

**President Donald Trump:** The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1414; fax 202-456-2461; to send comments, go to [www.whitehouse.gov/contact](http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact).

**U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley:** D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Pendleton office: 310 S.E. Second St. Suite 105, Pendleton 97801; 541-278-1129; [merkley.senate.gov](mailto:merkley.senate.gov).

**U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden:** D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR



# Sometimes we just need to listen

Hearing the words "Why don't you just?" makes you want to scream, smack somebody and then run away. I find those to be appropriate responses.

I don't think anybody's ever happy to hear "Why don't you just?" no matter how that sentence ends. OK, maybe if it ends with "Why don't you just take your winnings from the roulette table in stacks of hundreds?" that would be fine.

Apart from that, "Why don't you just?" is not an appropriate answer. It's shorthand for "I have instantaneously solved your problem because I am The Solution Giver. Now let's talk about something that interests me."

It's the "just" that does it: It emotionally diminishes and reduces the complexities of the other person's situation. To the one who took a risk and trusted you with a personal story, to be met with a "Why don't you just" is really to couch a kind of flippant injustice within that "just."

We want a listener to offer comfort and to suggest that we can face a challenge if we figure out what's at the heart of the problem. We're relying on a friend to aid us in confronting our underlying issues and give us hope that not only will we survive the experience but that we'll ultimately draw strength from it.

If we've been wrangling with a problem for 10 days, 10 months or 10 years, we're not looking for a glib, easy and



**GINA BARRECA**

obvious solution that can be summed up in 10 words.

If a friend confesses he's lonely, for example, saying, "Why don't you just go out and meet some people?" makes it sound as if forging new intimate relationships never occurred to him. To be honest, he'd be better off with new people, if this is the best his current friends can suggest.

To tell a friend suffering from heartbreak, "Why don't you just stop torturing yourself? Why don't you just get over it already?" is like scribbling condolences on a Post-it note and sticking it on a car's windshield outside the funeral parlor during viewing hours. It's less than helpful, even if the intentions behind it are good. It's dismissive, boxing up tough times and putting a bow on the package.

Another example: If a friend sighs "I feel fat," he or she knows that putting down the fork is a possibility. But for some reason it's not an option at the moment. Don't toss off the easy responses, such as, "Why don't you just lose weight?"; "Why don't you just eat less?"; "Why don't you, instead of enjoying creamy, delicious and freshly prepared fettuccine Alfredo, just eat beets?"

Worries about size, self-worth and attractiveness can't be handled long term by superficial quick fixes. And if it were really that easy to eat only healthy foods, the whole country would be svelte, fit and trim which, if you've been to the mall lately, you know isn't the case. Beets are nice, but they are rarely the cure.

Poet Bruce Cohen, my university colleague, was telling me about the boxes of "valuable" vinyl records he's collected none of which he's listened to for a dozen years. He and his wife are trying to clear space in their house and so I asked, "Why don't you just sell the records and do something with the money?" Bruce answered honestly: "I like knowing they're there." Bruce doesn't want a solution because he doesn't like to think there's a problem.

We might not be sensible all the time, but we most certainly think other folks ought to be. We want to dispel our helplessness at our friend's discomfort by telling them just what to do, but that's merely a way to make ourselves feel better and not a way to offer solace.

Why don't we just listen as carefully as we can? I will, if you will.

*Gina Barreca is a board of trustees distinguished professor of English literature at University of Connecticut and the author of 10 books. She can be reached at [www.ginabarreca.com](http://www.ginabarreca.com).*

## GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from *The (Annapolis, Maryland) Capital Gazette*:

The funerals are over.

We said goodbye to John McNamara on Tuesday at the University of Maryland. In the days since the rampage in the Capital Gazette offices that killed John, Rebecca Smith, Wendi Winters, Gerald Fischman and Rob Hiaasen, family, friends and colleagues have gathered to say a final farewell.

We have many regrets, but perhaps none greater than this one: We regret we didn't know our friends better.

Whether you work with someone for 26 years or six months, a job friendship often comes with some boundaries. They're usually set by mutual agreement, often unspoken but acknowledged. Do you talk about families? Sports? Politics?

Or just the job? Past the widget, please.

Sometimes the friendship created from shared daily experiences extends beyond the workplace into something

that transcends and outlasts this job or that assignment. That's laudable but rare.

But for many people, the boundaries remain.

So, as we have said goodbye, we've discovered we have regrets.

We regret that we didn't talk to Gerald more about his family, which was clearly the center of his life rather than his work as a journalist. We would have loved to ask him about his poetry, but also more about his travels.

The notion of John McNamara dancing strikes us as wonderful and would have made knowing him a completely different experience, and yet the photos displayed at his service clearly showed him grooving to some song. We regret we never saw that or talked more about music.

We regret we didn't ask Rob Hiaasen one more question about his favorite singer, James Taylor. We knew he interviewed him early in his career but seeing a photo of a curly-haired younger Rob

actually asking the questions made us want to hear one more time how he was so star struck he flubbed it. And why did Rob never tell us he swiped an album from his sister?

Wendi, we regret that she couldn't get any more blood from us. It had been years since the bloodmobile pulled into our parking lot. But we always thought there would be one more PR Bazaar so you could get us to talk to nonprofits who want our help.

And Rebecca, we regret that we never asked you what living in Dundalk was like, or knew more about the plans you had for the little girl who was going to be your daughter.

If you're headed to work today, look around your office or your shop or the work floor. What do know about the people who share your days with?

We lost five people we thought we knew, and the past two weeks have shown us there was so much more to learn.

We regret we didn't know them better.