

GUEST EDITORIAL

State still failing foster kids

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

A state audit found in January that Oregon’s child welfare system was so disorganized and inconsistent that it was putting some of the state’s most vulnerable children at risk.

Millions were misspent. Lawsuits forced the state to pay out other millions for failure to protect children. And the audit said the agency’s response to problems was slow, indecisive and inadequate.

Since that audit, the Department of Human Services began in March to issue monthly reports to Gov. Kate Brown showing what progress it has made. There has been some encouraging news. But Oregonians have no reason to be satisfied.

The state audit jolted DHS and the Legislature. DHS has a new director of the foster care system. The Legislature authorized more caseworkers to address inadequate staffing. That has helped, but DHS modeling shows its staffing is still inadequate.

“Child welfare caseworkers are over worked, carrying cases more than double what the workload model would suggest is manageable and dealing with cases that are physically and emotionally demanding,” the most recent report to Gov. Brown says.

Because of staffing and workload issues, important work has not been getting done.

For instance, since September 2017 Lane County has had a backlog of 1,000 assessments it needed to do of child abuse and neglect. DHS tried something new. It planned a blitz to work through the backlog. Child safety consultants came in from all over the state and were able to work through 425 of the needed assessments.

Progress is not being made everywhere.

One of the most discouraging statistics in the October report is the number of children who were victims again of abuse and neglect within 12 months of an initial incident. That statistic has climbed slightly from nearly 11 percent at the end of 2017 to nearly 12 percent in the second quarter of 2018.

Legislators and Gov. Brown have been working hard between legislative sessions on big plans to introduce bills in the 2019 session to put in place a carbon tax and spend the millions in new revenue.

Where are their big plans to care for the foster children the state is failing?



Divided Congress should still strive to pursue big policy ideas

The U.S. government is divided once again. Democrats have the House of Representatives, while Republicans still hold the presidency and have deepened their control over the Senate. This means actual legislative breakthroughs are likely to be few and far between. But that doesn’t mean it’s useless to think about policy — on the contrary, now is a perfect time for lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to lay out their big ideas, as a way of inspiring the country to think about the future. Here’s a brief list of things that ought to be top priorities:

- No. 1. Better universal health care

Obamacare was a compromise — government would force people to buy health insurance, and help pay for it if necessary, but the private insurance industry would stay intact. But health care costs have continued to rise:

Medicare has been significantly better than private companies at controlling costs, probably because the government can use its bargaining power to hold down prices. Hence, the federal government should play a bigger role in the health-insurance system. The single-payer Medicare For All plan is popular on the left, but I favor a public option, along the lines of the Medicare X plan, meaning consumers could buy a public insurance plan if private markets come up short.

- No. 2. Comprehensive immigration reform

In a rational world, immigration wouldn’t be a pressing problem — net illegal immigration has virtually vanished, despite the breathless headlines about caravans of migrants from Central America. And the education level of immigrants has been rising steadily:

But despite these developments, the immigration issue has polarized and embittered Americans in recent years, and it needs to be solved once and for all. A path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants — which is favored by a large majority of Americans — should be combined with a program to make the country’s legal system more favorable to immigrants

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with skills. Canada’s system, in which immigrants are evaluated for their job skills and education as well as family ties, seems like the perfect model to emulate.

- No. 3. Minimum-wage increase

U.S. wages have been stagnating for a while:

Minimum-wage policies could potentially help change this dynamic, not just by forcing up pay, but by creating a culture of wage hikes and worker bargaining. A whole raft of economic evidence has shown that minimum wages are not as damaging to employment as was once believed. Experiments with \$15 minimum wages in cities like Seattle have generally raised incomes while inflicting minimal harm on the labor market. The nation as a whole is overdue for a higher minimum wage, which now stands at \$7.25 an hour and hasn’t been raised since 2009. A comprehensive new federal minimum-wage policy should index the wage floor to inflation, to avoid the need for repeated future battles over additional increases. It should also allow states and cities some flexibility, so that rural areas with low productivity won’t be forced to match the wages of big, highly productive cities like Seattle or San Francisco.

- No. 4. Climate policy

The U.S. is no longer the indispensable nation in the fight against climate change — that would be China, whose carbon emissions are now much higher. But that doesn’t mean the U.S. should sit on its hands in the fight against global warming. A car-

bon tax would set a positive example for other countries. The government should also be pouring much more money into research and development of alternative-energy technologies, especially batteries and other power storage, as well as technologies that pull carbon out of the atmosphere. The funding of ARPA-E, the government agency charged with doing cutting-edge energy research, should be increased to at least \$3 billion a year. And the fruits of these research efforts should be shared with China, India and other developing countries, to make sure they develop along a greener path than the U.S. did.

- No. 5. Housing reform

Rent is getting less affordable in the U.S.:

The problem is especially acute in big cities like San Francisco, where much of the economic opportunity lies. In addition, the Great Recession wiped out the housing wealth of poor and middle-class Americans:

The solution is to push local governments to build more housing, and to help lower-income Americans buy more of that housing. My Bloomberg Opinion colleague Conor Sen and I recently called for a plan to combine density incentives with support for home purchases. Shortly after our article appeared, Senator Elizabeth Warren produced a plan along very similar lines. Democrats in Congress should take up Warren’s plan, and the housing shortage more generally.

President Donald Trump isn’t likely to let any of these ideas be written into law. But pushing concrete legislation on these five points would help inspire the country with the promise of real solutions and a better tomorrow. Congress should get the ball rolling now.

Noah Smith is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. He was an assistant professor of finance at Stony Brook University, and he blogs at Noahpinion.

Letters to the editor

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