

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

State audit turns up problems

Editorial from The (Bend):

Every year the Oregon Secretary of State's Office takes a statewide look at the financial practices of state agencies that operate federally financed programs. Among other things, auditors check agencies' record-keeping and compliance with the requirements of the programs involved. Taken at face value, the picture the audit paints is not a pretty one.

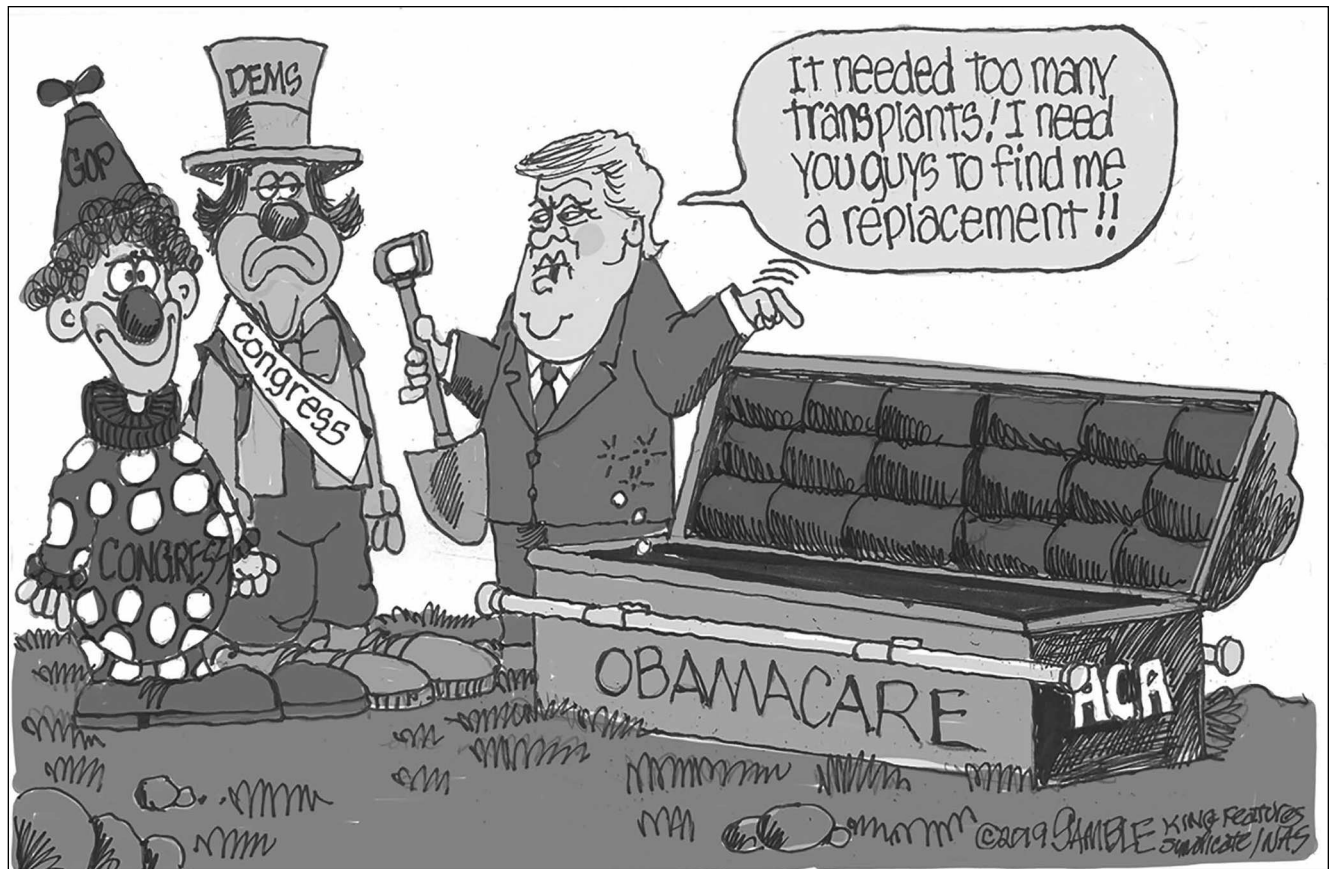
It found what auditors described as "material weaknesses" in the reports from several agencies, including the problem-ridden Department of Human Services. The report says material weaknesses are ones that create a reasonable possibility that the programs' financial statements could be wrong, and that a problem or problems could go undetected.

Thus, at DHS auditors found after examining a random sample of foster care cases, eligibility regulations weren't always met, and, in some cases, home studies and background checks of new and continuing foster care providers either were not done at all or were somehow incomplete.

In the Department of Agriculture auditors found problems with the way the state handles the electronic benefits cards that are used by clients of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps). Some offices did not inventory their stock of EBT cards on schedule and did not compare that inventory with stock control log books. And at the Oregon Health Authority, auditors found some accounts were overstated, while others were understated.

Audits like this one are designed, in part, to turn up problems so that they can be corrected before they grow. Accurate record-keeping is a critical part of assuring that children are kept safe, that SNAP benefits are going only to those entitled to them and that officials know how much is actually being spent on the Oregon Health Plan.

The agencies themselves should pay close attention to the statewide audit, but so, too, should lawmakers. If state agencies cannot keep their books straight, that may be an indicator of larger problems to come.



Trying to let go of lost treasure

"These things have a way of showing up," is how my pal Sid ended his note. He was trying to reassure me. A recently retired surgeon, smart and intuitive, Sid was instinctively responding to what he recognized as the frantic edge of what I'd hoped would sound like a casual email.

I spent an hour writing emails or phoning everybody we'd stayed with, as well as every place we'd visited, dined or shopped in during a week of travels, in search of a treasured scarf I'd left behind in one of those places.

We'd stayed with Sid and Anita at the beginning of our vacation. Florida greeted us with light rain and cold days, so I was grateful for my shawl and clutched it to me the way Linus drags around his security blanket.

This big scarf was special. It was beautiful, soft and extravagantly pretty. I'd hesitated while buying it because I suspected from the start that it was too nice for me — and I was buying on consignment. It wasn't the price but the fineness of the item that intimidated me.

I'm not being coy or falsely modest when I say that I consider myself unworthy of the delicate, the fragile or the perishable. I didn't grow up around fancy stuff, so I don't tend to treat things tenderly.

My family members smashed dishes for punctuation, so let's just say the china was not Limoges. The glassware was from Esso and had tigers on it. We used paper napkins, one napkin per person, per day.

I didn't worry about wrecking anything, which made life easier because



GINA BARRECA

I am, at heart, a wrecker.

I lack grace, poise and balance. I career from place to place. When senses of decorum were being handed out, I was in another room — probably knocking something over. As soon as I got a toy, I lost some part of it. I never in my life owned a Barbie for whom I could provide two shoes that matched. I was accused of having lost the Oriental Avenue card from our family's Monopoly set, causing us to substitute an entirely inappropriate index card.

I don't remember losing Oriental Avenue, but that's the point about losing stuff. Intention has nothing to do with it. When it's gone, it's gone; disappeared, vamoosed, escaped. It might have been destroyed, or it might have been rescued.

Perhaps the most frustrating question asked of people who are chronic losers (and I use the term with full understanding of its implications) is "Where did you have it last?"

If you're calm — and on the right medications — you can understand the logic behind such a line of inquiry.

If, however, you are frenzied and searching for something beloved or essential or consequential — pet or offspring, cellphone or bail money, piece of paper with the fail-safe code preventing viruses from infecting computers worldwide, or an elegant shawl — you don't want to be asked

where you last saw it. You want to be told where it is.

You're on a quest. Your earliest childhood vulnerabilities return with a vengeance. You return to a state of innocence, the kind of naivete you had in that darkened movie theater when you turned to a trusted adult and asked "What happened to Bambi's mother?" You didn't understand that random acts of chaos just happened. That's why, as a kid, you had hope.

Hope is why I called half the residents of Florida to ask whether they'd seen my scarf.

Nobody had. The scarf went rogue. It became a stray. Unneutered, it might well be capable of spawning hundreds of other scarves and starting a colony. We should only be so lucky.

I'm paying a price for not paying attention. Had I been cold enough, in need of the shawl on a practical basis, I would've wrapped it around me and known where it was.

What I need to do is let go of what's already gone. What an easy phrase to write; what a difficult task to accomplish.

What I am left with is a different kind of hope: that whoever found it will believe themselves lucky and believe themselves worthy. Maybe it was meant for them all along. Things have a way of showing up.

Gina Barreca is a board of trustees distinguished professor of English literature at the University of Connecticut and the author of 10 books. She can be reached at www.ginabarreca.com

GUEST EDITORIAL

State shouldn't pay people to work for unions

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Just how powerful are the state's public employee unions? Oregonians are about to find out with House Bill 2016.

Teachers are presumably hired in Oregon to — teach. HB 2016 would require that some teachers get paid to work for the unions, instead of doing their jobs. That union-friendly switcheroo wouldn't just apply to teachers, either.

The bill is a dream come true for the state's public employee unions. Unless Oregonians protest, it's well on the way to becoming law. It has passed the House and is now under consideration in the Senate. It should be stopped there.

Oregon's public employee unions have

rights to represent workers. That's the law. But HB 2016 shreds reasonable limits on those rights.

It would require schools, cities, counties, state government agencies and other public bodies to pay representatives of the appropriate union to work for the union while on the public payroll. So if the union representative is a teacher, the teacher wouldn't be teaching when he or she is working for the union. And even though taxpayer dollars would be paying the teacher to teach, taxpayers would be directly paying for union work. That's wrong.

Some school districts have already negotiated such arrangements in union contracts. That's better than what this bill

would do. This bill is one size fits all. It requires it no matter how small a school district or other government body is. That is not fair.

HB 2016 also does not put reasonable, clear limits on how much time representatives of the union work for the union — rather than for the public. A teacher hired by a school district could end up never teaching, spending all his or her working hours doing the union's business. There's not even a provision in the law for adequate notice to an employer so an employer can know when the employee will actually be doing the job they were hired to do.

There's more. If a union member wants

to give his cellphone number, home phone number and personal email address to the union, that's great. But HB 2016 requires public bodies to disclose that personal information to the union — if it has it — for every employee who could be a member of their union.

It applies even if the employee doesn't want to be in the union or if the employee doesn't want the union to have that information. Why is forced disclosure of personal information to unions OK? Employees should be able to opt in to any disclosure of the information — or at least be able to opt out. HB 2016 fails to do that.

Oregon's public employee's unions should not be able to dictate state law. Kill HB 2016.

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Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Dustin Newman, police chief; John Clark, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Jeff Smith, roadmaster; Matt Shirliff, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Cindy Carpenter, county clerk.