

OUR VIEW

State’s sluggish response

What if Oregon’s Employment Department had a computer system that it didn’t have to fight to get people unemployment benefits? What if its system was flexible enough to adapt when changes are made to unemployment programs or new programs begin?

Maybe then, fewer of the tens of thousands of Oregonians would be waiting for unemployment benefits. Maybe it wouldn’t be a victory to get hold times down to less than an hour.

That different present might exist if real progress had been made with the millions the Oregon Legislature has allocated to the department’s computer upgrade. The pandemic is a disaster that caught people flat-footed. The department would have been seriously challenged to cope with 470,000 Oregonians filing for unemployment benefits since March, no matter how fancy its computers are. Other states face similar backlogs. But Oregon legislators can’t be allowed to say: Gosh, who knew the employment department’s computer system was such a mess?

We spoke recently with David Gerstenfeld, the new interim head of the department. Many encouraging things are happening.

Wait times are down. More claims are being processed. About 150 volunteers from other state agencies are helping the department reach out to people — to at least let people know that somebody is working on their claims. The Oregon Army National Guard is even pitching in. You can get data about unemployment in Oregon at qualityinfo.org/covid-19.

As Gerstenfeld told us, one of the most frustrating things for his employees is knowing people need help and the department has fallen behind. That in no way diminishes the frustration and financial problems people experience waiting for benefits, he said. He is understandably reluctant to commit to a date when the backlog will be tamed.

The department’s computer system is from the 1990s. It apparently can’t even handle web-based applications. Legislators began the process to upgrade the department’s computer system with \$5 million in 2015.

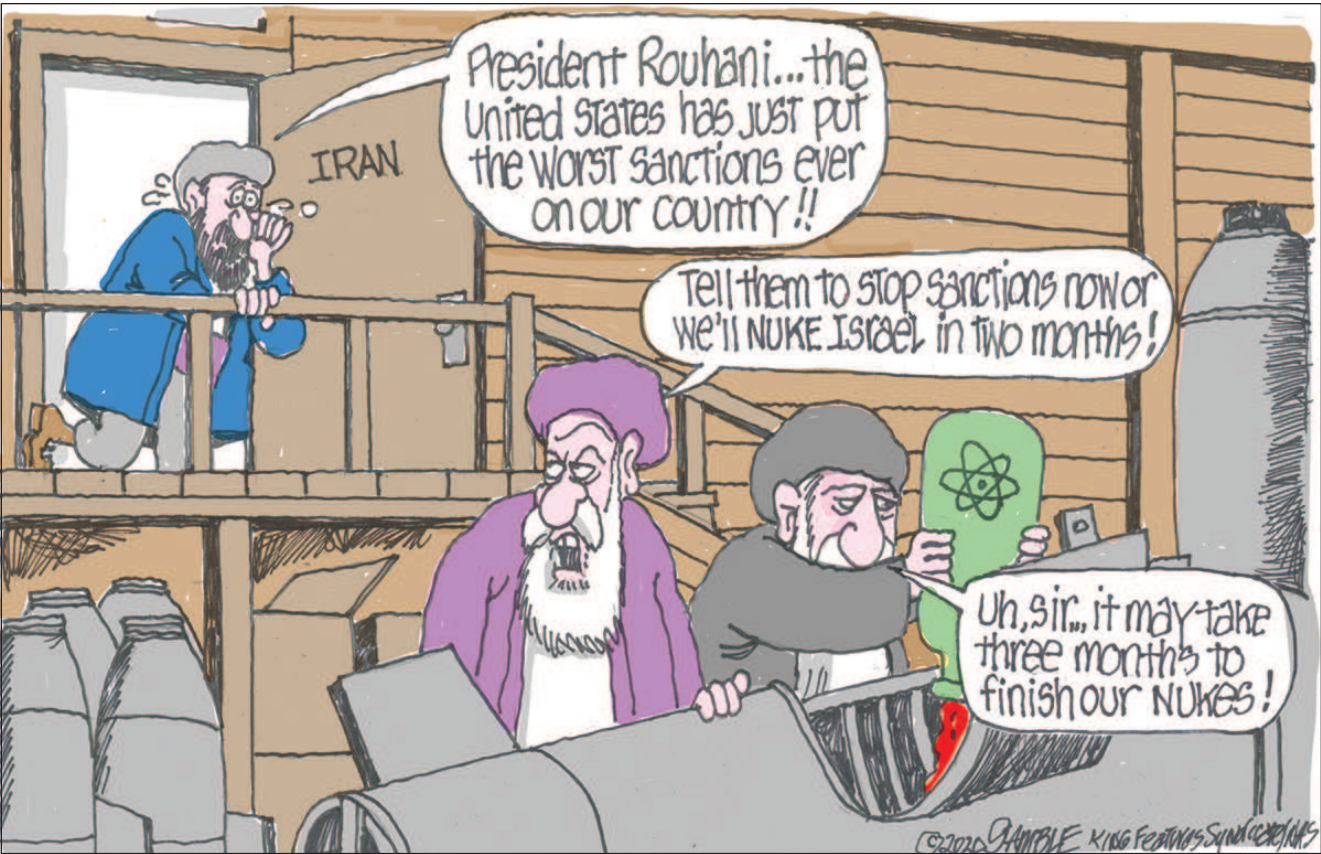
That money and more millions did not just sit around for five years. Modernizing the system is complicated. This is the kind of big, technological project that goes bad. Oregon can’t afford a multimillion-dollar failure. The state has what it calls a “stage gate” process for marching through such an upgrade. One look at that flow chart and the memories of how tech projects have fallen flat and you will know why things are moving slowly.

Isn’t five years too slow, though?

It is only this year that the department has gotten to the point where it may pick a vendor?

The department’s priority must be catching up on the unemployment backlog, not trying to rush into a new computer system. We get that. But is it going to be five more years before the department’s system is upgraded?

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Give docs fast access to vaccine

Should doctors who are working in COVID-19 intensive care units have access for themselves to Moderna’s potential coronavirus vaccine? U.S. health care workers are infected with the virus every day. If we have a probable vaccine that is almost certainly reasonably safe and likely to be effective, why shouldn’t doctors — who are scientifically trained to make these judgments — be allowed to vaccinate themselves to protect both their own lives and those they treat?

Yes, it’s possible that there will be unacceptable side effects. Like other medicines, a COVID-19 vaccine may be right for some people and not others. The proposed vaccine’s Phase 1 trials — the first of three specified by the Food and Drug Administration — indicate that it’s probably safe and may be effective. The earliest it may be available to the public is September, although under the standard protocols for Phase 2 and Phase 3 trials, it may not be fully validated for up to 18 months.

Doctors, along with nurses and other health care professionals on the front lines, voluntarily risk exposure to the coronavirus to help save the lives of others. If we can trust anyone to make benefit-risk decisions for themselves, it would be these brave men and women, yet they are not allowed to do so under the FDA’s precautionary stance. The agency frequently appears to be more concerned with the costs of using a drug that is not yet 100% proven than the costs of waiting months to treat a dangerous disease.

There is, of course, a tricky balance between saving lives by ensuring the quality of drugs on the market versus losing lives by not allowing their use as quickly as possible. In law, society might allow 10 guilty people to go free rather than convict one innocent person. While we do not know the exact ratio, the FDA is more comfortable keeping good drugs off of the market than allowing an unproven

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one (even if patients are well aware that it’s unproven).

The FDA prohibition intrinsically implies that doctors are not scientifically qualified to make benefit-risk decisions. But doctors make decisions about the most appropriate treatments for their patients every day, dealing inevitably with incomplete information. Shouldn’t a doctor be allowed to decide for themselves whether they will be injected with a safe vaccine that might be effective?

Perhaps if doctors could make that decision, it would be the camel’s nose under the tent. The next thing you know, nurses want it, too. Are nurses qualified to decide for themselves whether they should have the vaccine, perhaps by consulting the doctors around them?

And if doctors and nurses can have it, what about the orderlies — or all the people working in nursing homes? They’ll point out that if they’re protected, thousands of nursing home residents’ lives might be saved. Perhaps then we’ll need to give the vaccine to police, fire and refuse collection workers, to transit workers and grocery store clerks, to the workers in meatpacking plants and auto assembly lines.

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Writers must sign their letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com.

This may be what the FDA fears, but we should remember that some doctors will also decline to accept the vaccine, and others will follow their lead.

This has happened before. It famously took years for the FDA to approve the drug azidothymidine, or AZT, to treat AIDS and HIV, even though thousands of people were dying. In another case, the FDA originally rejected a drug to treat Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The disease mostly affected young boys, causing their muscles to weaken gradually to the point where they became unable to walk and eventually succumbed to respiratory or heart problems by their late teens or 20s. It took massive pressure from parents to finally get past the FDA’s concern that allowing the drug “would undermine the integrity of the FDA.”

The 21st Century Cures Act requires the FDA to incorporate patient preferences with respect to their own benefit-risk assessments into the drug approval process. The question is, once FDA has determined that the drug is safe, should people — beginning with doctors — be able to make their own determination about taking something we don’t yet know for sure is effective?

Many doctors would likely shun the FDA’s precautionary stance and take a chance that a drug may work for them. This would produce faster final approval, which is better for everyone.

Nicolaus Tideman is a professor of economics at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and former senior staff economist for the president’s Council of Economic Advisers. Richard Williams is a senior affiliated scholar with the Mercatus Center at George Mason University and former director for social sciences at the FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

Your views

City needs to be sure new playground is sanitized

I read, with great hope, about the re-vamping of the Baker City playground. I had hoped to read the method by which the keepers will clean the equipment between uses or even 3-4 times a day; whichever is the best. Nothing in the story referred to that difficulty. The playground looks and reads like a wonderful place for children and their parents to get out of the house while COVID is a major problem. However, would like to see how cleanliness will be maintained. Hope there is a reasonable plan.

Iva Mace
Baker City

Together we can defend American values of equality

When I was a boy my Dad and I used to hang the American flag out our second-story window on a long wooden pole. My Dad learned from his Dad, who served in the Pacific in WWII. It was a family ritual. Now my young daughter will learn from me, as we have started putting the flag out together. I want her to be a good American; to know

the values behind the flag; to understand the importance of equality, justice, and liberty.

For anyone still curious about the Black Lives Matter protest last Tuesday, this gathering was about these very values. Racial injustice exists in America today for people of color. Our society is not yet equal. Liberty has not yet been secured for all. I brought my daughter to the protest to advocate for a more just future for our country. I also want her to know that to be a true patriot you must not just hang the flag, but stand up for the values behind it.

The Constitution is clear. It begins “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice...” Justice is the promise of fairness before the law. The protests growing across Baker County and this nation seek to form a more perfect union by ensuring that all Americans are treated equally before the law. This is an American cause. This is patriotic.

To those who counter-protest against calls for racial justice: It is your right, but it is un-American. Attaching a flag to your truck does not make you a patriot. Nor does facing down families, high school students, and neighbors

with assault rifles. Get out of your pickup, leave the guns at home; and join us. Together we can work toward a more inclusive and just society. Together we can defend American values and form a more perfect union.

Ethan Wolston
Baker City

This is not a time for divisive, threatening talk

With the exception of my sisters threatening to hit me if I didn’t follow their commands, I have never really been directly threatened — until last week.

Under the guise of journalistic fairness the Herald chose to print a threat to local advocates of racial justice. Without any basis in reality, an armed objector to the rally called the justice group “rioters.” He went on to issue the threat “They’re not going to break up anything in this town. We’ve got a lot of people who are willing to stand between them and that opportunity.” In full paranoid meltdown he went on to say the rally attendees, his Baker County neighbors, are trying to destroy America.

Wow! Dial it back dude.

What is so scary about people who believe that every life is worthy of dignity and justice? Equal rights for others does not mean less rights for you. It’s not a pie!

People willing to stand out in the rain holding signs expressing care, concern, and solidarity for the lives of people of color is the opposite of destruction. It is about strengthening America, our country, that we all love dearly. We all benefit when our communities acknowledge and support the rights of all.

Baker City Police have strong local support. They have been tasked and trained to protect people and property. Armed vigilantes, gathering for the ostensible purpose of preventing looting, make the work of local police more complicated and potentially more dangerous.

Come on Baker City, embrace your humanity and shut down the divisive talk. We are at a critical juncture in our nation’s history. It is time for us to find the common ground that we share. It is time to use our voices and votes to ensure liberty and justice for all.

Cynthia Roberts
Baker City