

Bangor Daily News

Founded in 1889

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CONTRACTING OUT WELFARE-TO-WORK

Two years ago, Gov. Paul LePage's administration touted progress in connecting more public assistance recipients with jobs and valuable work experience: a first-of-its-kind collaboration between the state departments of Labor and Health and Human Services.

DHHS started contracting with the Labor Department so career specialists would work with participants in ASPIRE, the worker training and job placement side of the state and federally funded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The Department of Labor would set up TANF recipients with "work experience" — largely unpaid, resume-building volunteer positions with employers — and help to place them in jobs.

"This collaboration takes advantage of each department's core competencies; it's a critical element in a client-focused approach to create a pathway to employment," Health and Human Services Commissioner Mary Mayhew and Labor Commissioner Jeanne Paquette said in an April 2014 Bangor Daily News OpEd.

Two years later, the DHHS is changing course with ASPIRE. It plans to leave the worker training and job placement program entirely in the hands of a state contractor starting July 1. Seventy state employees would lose their jobs — 58-60 DHHS caseworkers and 12 Labor Department employees who are serving ASPIRE clients, said Mary Anne Turowski, the Maine State Employees Association's political and legislative director.

The move to contract out ASPIRE isn't actually needed to solve the problem DHHS says it's trying to solve: the fact that Maine has come up short in meeting TANF work participation rates set by federal law and faces fines as a result. Plus, the contracting move comes without a coherently stated rationale. It's not clear what a contractor — working in newly established offices and starting from scratch in connecting with educational institutions and employers — will do differently or better.

(A DHHS spokeswoman said the department can't discuss details about the ASPIRE contract while the request for proposals is pending.)

What's clear is that, in putting ASPIRE out to bid, DHHS is emphasizing compliance with federal work participation rates above all else. Meanwhile, no state fully meets both federally required work participation requirements — the standard to which DHHS would hold its contractor. And officials from both sides of the aisle agree that the work participation rate is a flawed measure of an assistance program's success.

Under federal law, states must meet an overall work participation rate of 50 percent, meaning 50 percent or more of adult TANF recipi-

ents must be working, receiving training, attending school or volunteering at least 30 hours per week. (A state receives no credit for an adult working anything less than 30 hours a week.) States face a 90 percent requirement for adults in two-parent families.

Most states meet their requirements either by shrinking their TANF caseloads (for which they receive credits that allow them to comply while meeting a lower work participation rate) or by counting other populations of low-income, working adults toward the rate, thereby improving the numbers.

"In its current state, the [work participation rate] is entirely process-driven," Eloise Anderson, secretary of the Department of Children and Families for Wisconsin's Republican governor, Scott Walker, said in testimony to a U.S. House Ways and Means subcommittee in April 2015. (Anderson was speaking for the Secretaries Innovation Group, to which Mayhew belongs.) "There is currently no outcome-based performance measure established to evaluate success in increasing the employment of low-income families."

Since the two-parent rate is especially impossible (no state meets the 90 percent threshold), the majority of states simply remove two-parent families from TANF altogether and provide assistance using state funds. "Typically, they can do it in a budget-neutral way where they can swap those dollars for others," said Liz Schott, a senior fellow at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

When states fall short of their work participation requirements, they face the prospect of federal fines, which the federal government rarely forces states to pay in full — or often at all — if those states file corrective actions plans and meet requirements in future years.

Indeed, Maine has started to meet the overall work participation rate. It reported the second-highest rate in the nation for 2013, according to federal data released Jan. 12. While the state still fell short on the rate for two-parent families, the fact that it's meeting requirements for 98 percent of the population served through TANF should drastically reduce the amount Maine ultimately owes, said Schott.

Still, Mayhew and DHHS are moving ahead with a contract that stresses work participation rates above all else. The chosen vendor won't collect the full contract sum unless Maine meets both work participation rates.

If the administration really wanted to make a difference in the lives of low-income residents, it could jump through the bureaucratic hoops needed to comply with esoteric federal requirements, then work on a program design actually focused on moving low-income families out of poverty.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

2nd Amendment

After watching the Republican candidates demonstrate their slavish loyalty to the NRA during the last debate, I feel I must respond. If Chris Christie is correct when he said, "I don't think the founders put the Second Amendment as No. 2 by accident," then it follows they knew what they were doing when they began the Second Amendment with "A well-regulated militia." The government does not only have the right but the duty to regulate gun ownership. President Barack Obama has tried to regulate, never infringe on, the right to bear arms.

It would be refreshing if the Republican defenders of the Constitution would consider all of its amendments, especially the First Amendment, which states, "Congress shall pass no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion." I interpret these words to include the right of Muslims to practice their religion. The 15th Amendment also should be remembered, "the right of citizens to vote shall not be denied or abridged." With so many states trying to restrict voting rights, this amendment should be seriously discussed.

By the way, could somebody give me an example of when Obama tried to take away anyone's gun? All he has done is try to regulate weapons used in mass killings.

Mark Brown
Marshfield

People 'from away'

I am "from away." Nearly 19 years ago I moved here with my small family to live, work and raise my child. Most everyone was friendly and welcoming,

and I count many native-born Mainers and other people who moved here by choice as my friends. Why is this a problem for Michael Cianchette? He spent time in his Jan. 15 BDN column putting down people from away, a refrain I have heard many times since living here. I don't understand it.

What we need to do instead is welcome newcomers who choose to move here, get jobs, bring their children to attend the small and wonderful schools, and go on to one of the fine colleges in Maine. Don't close off the wonderful experience with Maine that most of us have come to love and cherish.

Welcome us. Make use of what we have to contribute to our neighbors and towns. We want to be here, so it is discouraging when some in our new chosen home pull away the welcome mat and essentially say "go elsewhere, you're not wanted."

I'm staying right here. And if Cianchette ever gets up to Washington County, he can meet me at Quoddy Bay Lobster in Eastport, and we'll have a couple of lobster rolls. They're the best.

Katharine Evans
Pembroke

WRITE TO US

Letters must be 250 words or fewer and include a full name, town of residence and daytime phone number. OpEds may be 700 words. Letters may be edited or rejected for clarity, taste, libel and space. If a letter or OpEd is published, submissions by the same writer will not be considered for 60 days.

Letters may be sent to letters@bangordailynews.com. OpEds may be sent to OpEd@bangordailynews.com or P.O. Box 1329, Bangor, ME 04402-1329.

.COMMENTS

OpEd contributors Jonathan Fulford and Rock Alley, "Why we're running for state Senate: Augusta shouldn't prop up rigged system":

This is the type of leadership I would like to see in Augusta. They are the working folks of Maine, just like most of us.

— mijalted

It's great to have people like them running for office. Thanks for the concern.

— beanboy

This is the type of leadership that is destroying Maine. Marginally successful people barely able to make ends meet now want to be able to run the state and our children's futures. When the State House was occupied by the rich and successful, the state was prosperous.

— Chasseur1814

Well-written and hopefully will drum up lots of support at the voting booths. Maine is sick and tired of GOP leadership and a dismal economy. No more breaks for the rich or the corporations.

— depnfree

Good for them. They won't find one Republican who understands or even thinks about the working men and women of this state and country. For them, it's all about guns, gays, God and tax breaks for their friends. It's great to see that these four could be bringing the perspectives of real working people to the State House.

— bigsky

Kudos to them for acting on their beliefs and making a run for office.

— yourmaineguuy

Collins' true colors?

Once again, our elected Republican Sen. Susan Collins betrays the conservatives of Maine. To her shame, she was one of two Republicans in the Senate who voted against repealing Obamacare and defunding Planned Parenthood. By this vote alone, though there are many other examples, she has shown her true colors.

She votes according to her beliefs and not those of her constituents. She uses the excuse that women won't have access to "health care" if Planned Parenthood doesn't receive federal funding, which is ridiculous. How hard is it to understand that we do not wish to support with our hard-earned tax dollars an organization that performs unspeakable acts of cruelty to unborn children or a government-forced tax on people who cannot afford Obamacare?

Thousands of our young workers live paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford the high premiums for health insurance. When they file their tax returns this year, they will have to pay a nearly \$700 penalty if they don't have insurance. That's money they normally depend on receiving in a refund. It's outrageous and unfair. Collins isn't affected because she receives premium health insurance on our dime.

Collins needs to refresh her memory and read the Republican Party platform and vote according to those principles. I urge Maine conservatives to not re-elect this Democrat disguised as a Republican the next time she is up for re-election. A liberal with a conscience would be a better choice than Collins.

Beth Weirich
Glenburn

OTHER VOICES

WHY LEADERSHIP CHANGES MATTER

In October, another African president, Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of Congo, engineered a referendum so he could seek another term. The ruler has spent a total of 31 years in power.

The referendum was marred by violence, but in the end, voters agreed to end the limit of two consecutive presidential terms. Last Wednesday, the political opposition in the capital of Brazzaville vowed to challenge him in the March election.

Sassou-Nguesso is by no means the only African ruler clinging to power for a decade or more. President Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi awarded himself a third term last year in the face of still-simmering violence. Rwanda's Paul Kagame gave himself more years as well.

Other self-styled presidents-for-life include Jose Eduardo dos San-

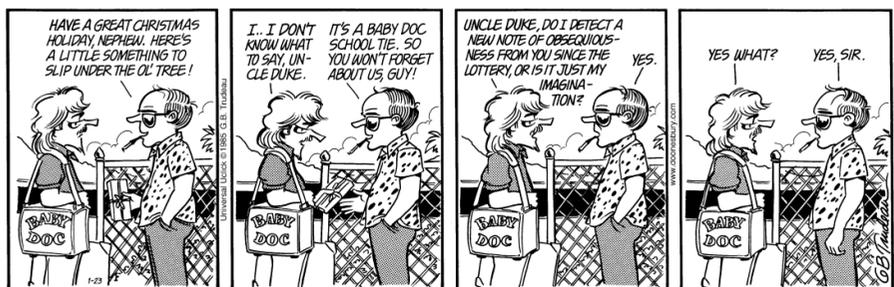
tos of Angola, in office since 1979, and Paul Biya of Cameroon, in power since 1982 despite a slumbering economy and terroristic assaults on the nation by Boko Haram. Robert Mugabe has run Zimbabwe since 1980.

The perpetuation of longtime, often corrupt, African politicians cannot work to the benefit of their citizens. Even if the leaders are minimally competent, they usually offer no beneficial ideas for governance or policy. Their long rule also guarantees that the consolidation and cooperation needed by African nations are not likely to occur.

America's policies toward these countries should be predicated on a healthy political system. Democracy and the changes of leadership that are part of it truly matter.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (Jan. 19)

DOONESBURY



GARRY TRUDEAU