

# Bangor Daily News

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## MEALS ON WHEELS DHHS SHOULD CHECK THE LAW, RETHINK PLAN

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services says it wants Meals on Wheels delivered more efficiently.

But we have our doubts that DHHS can squeeze more efficiencies out of a decades-old, volunteer-driven system that delivers more than 800,000 meals each year to almost 18,000 people across the state at an average cost of \$7.44 per meal — well within the national norm, even for more urban areas.

Maine's five area agencies on aging have provided meals to seniors in every corner of the state for decades. Now the agencies appear to be part of a move by DHHS to rework operations without any clear reason. DHHS informed the area agencies in a recent letter that it intends to put senior meal services out to bid in time for the successful bidder to take over Oct. 1, 2017.

"Since Title III funds have not kept pace with the burgeoning ranks of vulnerable adults, it is time for a focused look at efficiency in providing these services and we will be pursuing a request for proposal," Gary Wolcott, director of DHHS' Office of Aging and Disability Services, wrote to the five area agency on aging directors in the April 14 letter.

The announcement took the agencies' directors by surprise. After all, DHHS is finishing a new, federally required four-year state plan on aging, and the 75-page document doesn't mention plans to put meal services out to bid. And DHHS hasn't informed the agencies that they're operating inefficiently.

"They're essentially putting a federal grant out to bid that has no documented deficiencies," said Noelle Merrill, executive director of the Eastern Area Agency on Aging, which serves Penobscot, Piscataquis, Washington and Hancock counties. "It's like firing somebody after giving them good evaluations for 40 years. We don't really understand."

Samantha Edwards, a DHHS spokeswoman, said the competitive procurement is a state requirement.

"The procurement process produces accountability among providers and ensures that Maine taxpayers receive the best value for the dollars they expend on services," she wrote in an email. "This is a key priority for the Administration. It is noteworthy that the Department is on track to release 100-125 RFPs this year compared to an average of 30-35 per year when this Administration took office."

In federal fiscal year 2015, the state chipped in 6 percent of the cost of providing meals — about \$372,000 — according to the Office of Aging and Disability Services, while federal funding totaling \$4.4 million covered 71 percent. The area agencies on aging collected

the rest through voluntary contributions from meal recipients and fundraising.

Most of the federal funding comes to Maine through the Older Americans Act, and DHHS appears to have a fundamental misunderstanding of what the federal law governing that funding allows it to do.

Since the 1970s, the Older Americans Act has designated each state's area agencies on aging as the entities in charge of dispensing federal funds in order to pay for senior services in their respective regions.

The federal regulations for Title III of the Older Americans Act spell it out clearly — that a state-level aging office distributes senior meals funding to the designated area agencies on aging. "Area agencies in turn make subgrants or contracts to service providers to perform certain specified functions," read the regulations.

Ultimately, then, it's up to the area agency on aging to decide whether to put meal services out to bid, not a state department.

There's an exception in federal law that would allow DHHS to contract meal services out on a state-wide basis, but DHHS would have to indicate in its four-year state plan on aging that it thinks it can provide meal services more economically through the contract. DHHS, however, hasn't shown it has found a more economical way to provide Meals on Wheels, much less indicated as much in the state aging plan it's completing.

Nationally, the majority of area aging agencies contract out meal services, and most providers are local nonprofit organizations, said Amy Gotwals, chief of public policy and external affairs at the National Association for Area Agencies on Aging. In Maine, however, the area agencies mostly provide meal services directly. In the decades they've provided those meals, they've built up volunteer networks that keep the meals coming — about 400 for the Eastern Area Agency on Aging and 2,000 state-wide, according to Merrill. And mealtimes offer seniors the opportunity to connect with an area agency for any number of other services, from advice on health insurance to help with home repairs to assistance with finding affordable housing. Plus, volunteers doing home deliveries can check in to make sure seniors are safe.

Under federal law, the area agencies on aging are the one-stop shop for information on services for seniors, and meals are a critical part of connecting seniors with those services.

The volunteer network and those points of connection are exactly what a bid process puts at risk when little appears to be wrong with how things are operating, save for insufficient funding to meet a growing need.

## OTHER VOICES

### PENTAGON MISREPRESENTS ASSAULT CASES

In war, the confusion generated by fighting and killing is often referred to as "the fog of war." According to records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act by Protect Our Defenders, an advocacy group committed to changing how the military handles sexual misconduct allegations, a "fog of lies" has been standard operating procedure at the Pentagon, too.

Protect Our Defenders uncovered an effort by the Pentagon to undercut support for a Senate bill that would strip military commanders of their authority to decide which sexual assault complaints go forward to trial. According to internal government records used to buttress the Pentagon's argument, civilian au-

thorities are less likely to hold people in the military responsible for sexual assault than military prosecutors are.

Not so. This shady data even alleges that military authorities aggressively prosecute sexual assaults where civilian authorities refuse to, which is the opposite of what happens in reality.

The Pentagon's testimony before Congress was a series of untruths designed to undermine efforts to move jurisdiction for prosecuting sex crimes from the military to civilian authorities.

Even if the military wasn't consciously lying during its testimony, this episode doesn't bode well for its ability to interpret straightforward data.

*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (April 24)*



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Sanders best candidate

What side is the Bangor Daily News taking in the presidential race? Democratic or Republican?

Will the BDN choose Hillary Clinton, who as a former first lady has some experience, or does the BDN prefer Bernie Sanders, who is more kind and quiet? Will the BDN endorse Ted Cruz, a religious conservative, Donald Trump, who is extreme to the biggest extent, or John Kasich, who is the least extreme out of all the Republicans?

I think Sanders is the best candidate for president because he promises the most freedom to the people out of all the candidates. He will protect the rights of all people no matter if they are a man or woman, Christian or Muslim. I think the BDN should endorse Sanders for president.

**Camden Ardry**  
*Pittsfield*

### LePage business sense

After following Gov. Paul LePage for several years, I would not bet the farm on his business ability. In 2013, the Maine Public Utilities Commission finalized an initial agreement with Statoil to develop an offshore wind power project on the Maine coast. Statoil was to invest \$120 million in the project and Maine ratepayers were supposed to contribute to this effort. Maine was poised to become first state in the nation to develop offshore wind power.

The University of Maine was working on this concept, and in their letter of support for Statoil they said "that landing Statoil was like attracting Google or Apple to our state." LePage pressured the Legislature to change the rules in the bidding process, favoring instead UMaine, which was expected to replace this world leader. Shortly afterward, Statoil withdrew its Maine project.

Maine lost our chance to have the jobs and investment that Statoil was willing to provide. Economists said that global investment in offshore power will reach a trillion dollars. By chasing Statoil away from Maine, LePage managed to deprive Maine people of the badly needed jobs and investment dollars. When mills close, he blames others, usually with an angry tirade.

**Robert D. Tweedie**  
*Westfield*

### Protecting firefighters

Until now, Maine law has

treated assault on a firefighter as a less serious crime than assault on a police officer or emergency medical personnel.

Eight years ago, I sponsored a bill to change that by making assault on a firefighter who is performing his or her official duties a Class C crime. It passed the House with overwhelming support, but it went on to die in the Senate. During the following year, the proposal was rejected by the policy committee that considered it.

I was proud to support a new bill, LD 1683, this session to give firefighters the same legal protection from assault that we give to other first responders. After earning unanimous support in the House and overwhelming bipartisan support in the Senate, the governor signed the measure into law.

It's been eight years in the making, but it will now be a serious crime to assault a firefighter who is responding to an emergency. Maine law will now protect all of our first responders from assault in the line of duty. I thank my colleagues who worked on and supported this bipartisan measure.

**Bob Duchesne**  
**State representative**  
*Hudson*

## 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.

## Bathroom choices

Last week, my daughter and I arrived at a rest stop between Baltimore, Maryland, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, behind a bus of church ladies on their way to outlet stores. Of course there was a long line for the six-stall women's room, and even the family room was in use. A glance in the open door of the men's room showed that two of the three stalls were free.

In my most spritely voice I said "excuse me guys but this girl has to go." One of the gentlemen said "go for it, I will neither deny or confirm that you are here." I said thanks

and that I hoped that he would extend that courtesy to any lady who followed me.

After I washed my hands and politely looked away from the urinals, I gracefully exited the men's room. Seeing that there appeared to be no fallout or seriously distressed men following me out, several ladies took the opening.

It does not matter if you are man, woman, boy or girl, we can compromise. None of the people at that rest stop had any idea what my politics were or what my "natural gender" was, but we all shared a need to relieve ourselves and were willing to think outside the box to do so.

I am sure that in the future there will be no gender-specific facilities, just rows of cubicles. We will all just grin sheepishly at one another as we cross to the sink as we do when we exit a portable toilet and life will go on.

**Ellen Willingham**  
*Winter Harbor*

## Connector problem

It is sad to think of what our currently peaceful neighborhood will be like once the I-395/Route 9 connector is built. It is sad that the Maine Department of Transportation forced the Bangor Area Comprehensive Transportation System to OK this project by holding hostage \$57 million in road project funding for the upcoming year in the Bangor area if they voted against the project, as reported in a March 26 BDN article.

It is sad that we wasted years with public meetings with the Department of Transportation, which promised the towns and residents a voice in how and where this connector would be built, or not built, as residents of the town of Edlington and the city of Brewer support.

It is sad the Department of Transportation changes its mind like the weather when this route was rejected for not satisfying the purpose and needs only to be brought back in the dark of night with no transparency on the department's part.

It is sad that we taxpayers will be dishing out \$61 million or more for a road when the state can't keep up with repairs to the roads and bridges we already have. It is sad that since this project started in 2000 traffic patterns, mill closings and other changes in our area do not change a thing.

It is sad that more people don't check out the truth at <http://i395rt9hardlook.com>. It's just plain sad.

**Carol and Vinal Smith**  
*Brewer*

## DOONESBURY



## GARRY TRUDEAU