

Bangor Daily News

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MAINE SHOULDN'T HELP ASYLUM SEEKERS

Images of Syrians flocking to Europe have heightened international concern about refugees from a civil war that has devastated that country. Germany is expected to handle more than 800,000 asylum applications before the year is over.

In Maine, there are far fewer asylum seekers, but they have been at the center of a political disagreement about immigration and public benefits. That debate should end now that a group that sought to repeal a new law allowing state financial assistance to these refugees has dropped that effort.

In the final days of this year's legislative session, lawmakers amended and approved a bill to provide General Assistance benefits for up to two years to those lawfully present in the United States and in the process of seeking "immigration relief" here. The bill was among the 65 that Gov. Paul LePage did not veto on time, allowing them to become law.

General Assistance, which is administered by municipalities but funded jointly by state and local governments, provides emergency aid for housing, medicine and other basic needs. Housing assistance accounts for the bulk of General Assistance support.

Federal law prohibits those who have applied for asylum — immigrants seeking to avoid persecution, torture or worse in their home countries — from applying for a work permit for five months. Processing the permit can take more than a year. Sen. Angus King and Rep. Chellie Pingree are working to fix this.

On the other side of the issue, a group led by conservative activist Stavros Mendros pledged to collect signatures to initiate a people's veto of the law. He abandoned that effort this week in favor of a Maine Republican Party-backed referendum to restrict welfare benefits.

This saves Maine, for now, from what was likely to be a hateful campaign based on fear and demonization of those who are different in order to withhold help from

men, women and families seeking to build lives in America. It also means that asylum seekers will be eligible for General Assistance benefits beginning Oct. 15, although the Department of Health and Human Services is still in the process of writing rules fulfilling the intent of the new law.

Department spokesman David Sorensen told the Portland Press Herald that the rules would be available for public comment in the "coming weeks" and that the department was working to determine the cost of the law change.

"The department is currently projecting costs, but at the end of the day, Maine taxpayers, against their wishes, will be paying millions of dollars for welfare for non-citizens as a result of the Legislature's actions this year," Sorensen said in an email to the newspaper.

We actually have nowhere near this level of certainty about what the public wishes on this matter. The administration has long said that LePage was re-elected because voters wanted welfare reform and that ending welfare for "illegal aliens" is a priority. But polling before the November 2014 election showed that jobs and the economy were the top concerns of Maine voters. Plus, the law allowing asylum seekers to collect General Assistance was enacted by people elected by "Maine taxpayers." Yet playing up fears of immigrants taking your tax dollars has been a staple of the LePage and Republican Party political playbooks.

Annually, General Assistance costs the state about \$12 million per year for about 12,000 recipients — a small slice of a state budget that exceeds \$3 billion annually. There are about 1,000 asylum seekers in Maine, so they will account for a small fraction of that cost, hardly "millions of dollars."

Lawmakers did the right thing by extending a temporary helping hand to these refugees. Without a repeal effort, it is time to lay this issue to rest and move on to more pressing matters, like economic development and job creation.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Police compassion

Recently, I saw a Bangor police officer go beyond the call of duty. While working what was clearly a sensitive domestic call, I witnessed the officer laughing and playing catch with the children of the home. He was turning an otherwise scary and sad time into something better.

At a time when so much of what police officers do is under such scrutiny and a distrust of officers is so high, I felt that this act of compassion and kindness must be noted. I do not know the officer's name, but I thought it should be noted.

Paul Denty
Bangor

Campaign finance fix

The Sept. 3 BDN article "Maine Public Campaign Financing Push Bucks National Tide" explains the upcoming referendum very well. Maine led the nation in 1996 by putting Clean Election laws on our books, and we will once again have the opportunity to set the standard by putting some teeth into those laws with a resounding "yes" vote on Question 1 in this fall's election.

With this additional force, big money's heavy hand can be limited and good candidates who could not otherwise afford to compete will be able to become our leaders.

If you would like to learn more about this issue with Democrat and Republican state legislators, a forum will be held at 4 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 13, at the Unitarian Universalist Church, 120 Park St., Bangor. The forum will be followed with a light dinner and an opportunity to learn about phone banking and to help turn the tide.

Nancy Jacobson
Bangor

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.

Upside-down world

We are a nation of laws. We hear this constantly. Yet, a Kentucky county clerk was jailed for not following the newly created law about marriage.

Were the activist judges who created that law jailed? Or was the president jailed for his many abuses and unlawful actions? No impeachments, no

jail time in these cases.

But the ordinary citizen must follow the law. It's all upside down.

Natalie Kavin
Presque Isle

Men's liberation

We have had a female liberation movement, now is the time for a male liberation movement. Males have gotten by through the eons with physical strength, thereby maintaining dominance. All that is slowly and painfully ending.

Males are hampered by the baggage that they are supposed to be dominant, supported by ancient cultural and religious norms. Nowadays, facing fierce international competition, we in the U.S. have the flexibility to modify some of this cultural baggage to see that males and females can play interchangeable roles, depending on skills, talent, education, thereby dropping all reference to sexual dominance.

It is the males that need to change, and that change will be the greatest thing that males can do to strengthen our own country in many ways. Most other countries would be way behind us in that respect. Our strength is in diversity. I believe the vast majority of males would breathe a sigh of relief to be liberated.

Philip C. Groce
Union

OTHER VOICES

UGANDA'S WORRISOME REPRESSION

In recent years in East Africa, an insidious trend toward authoritarianism has been taking root. From Kenya to Tanzania, governments increasingly have attempted to restrict media freedom, silence political criticism and hamper the activities of civil society organizations. Some nations, such as Kenya and Ethiopia, have used antiterrorism as a pretext to shut nongovernmental organizations and silence journalists. As a number of these countries gear up for elections in the next two years, the protection of independent civil society is critical to safeguarding democracy.

Uganda has become the latest theater in this struggle. Uganda introduced the NGO Bill of 2015, ostensibly in response to what the government deems a "rapid growth of non-governmental organizations [that] has led to subversive methods of work and activities, which ... undermine accountability and transparency." The bill requires that organizations "not engage in any activity which is ... contrary to the dignity of the people of Uganda." Such vague language gives the government wide berth to monitor and control the activities of organizations, many of which provide essential services. NGOs would be required to register with an established NGO board, which can revoke a permit at any time if it is in the "public interest to refuse to register the organization." Additional-

ly, leaders of organizations that operate without a permit are subject to fines, prosecution and even four to eight years in prison. Such harsh penalties for civic work have no place in any democratic society and should be scrapped, along with the provisions enabling outside government interference with independent NGOs.

Uganda's parliament was expected to debate the NGO bill last week but deferred the proceedings indefinitely. The delay gives the White House an opportunity to stand up for Uganda's civil society. The Obama administration last year vehemently opposed Uganda's anti-gay laws, even cutting or redirecting millions in aid and imposing sanctions on the country.

Uganda and Kenya, allies of the United States in the battle against al-Shabab in Somalia, appear to be taking their repressive cues from Ethiopia's authoritarian playbook. Ethiopia, a major U.S. security ally, enacted the Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2009; it restricts human rights groups, allows for imprisonment of activists and blocks foreign funding for human rights NGOs. Any holistic remedy to the authoritarian trend in East Africa is incomplete without tackling head-on the source of the contagion in Ethiopia. But there, too, the administration has showed unjustified deference to a repressive regime.

The Washington Post (Sept. 9)

.COMMENTS

Editorial, "Government efficiency doesn't happen by itself; Maine should join national effort":

It's really a sad commentary that "evidence-based policy making" should be a novelty: How else are policies evaluated? This is great start, and I really hope the state has the foresight to participate, but more importantly, follow through on the recommendations. I worry about the latter.

—hophead3

Government and efficiency? That is what they call an oxymoron.

—Kaliss

Governments are by nature inefficient. The best way to obtain the efficiency on an ongoing basis is to keep government small and local. Governments must do only the things that cannot be done at a more local level. The old adage remains true: The larger the government, the less free the people.

—Jennifer P

Relatively simple legislative changes would serve similar

purposes. Every law passed, in the section giving some department or agency the authority to create the rules "necessary" to implement the law, must include the measurements and reporting processes that will be necessary to report on the law's effectiveness. Every law passed also must include a sunset provision requiring re-authorization based on evidence of the law's effectiveness.

—Thistle

We don't need to join a national club to fix things. Our governor has been trying to do this for five years now and have been fought every inch of the way. Plenty of tax money is being spent on corporate contractors who then use the money to lobby to keep things the same. Our commissioners are never held accountable for anything they do. The people aren't told the truth, so they cannot fathom the truth and demand answers.

—Trademark

Seems like Ms. Ashcroft is not doing her job. Having such as "simple" list of all programs is a logical starting point. Seems to me it is the responsibility of

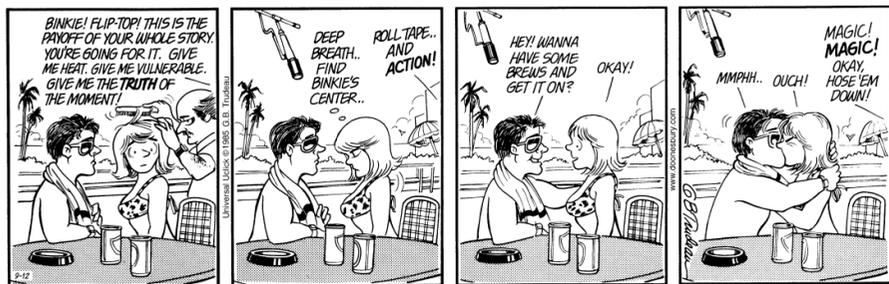
her department to compile and maintain such a list, along with the detail necessary to justify the work of her department. Failing to take initiative and create that list is, unfortunately, symbolic of a major problem within government. I wonder who she asked for "the list"?

—Chew H Bird

Maine spent almost a decade under Govs. Joe Brennan and John McKernan implementing Continuous Quality Improvement, the then-national state-of-the-art model used in corporations across America. It was getting results. It had citizen customer review of programs. When Angus King became governor he abolished this and replaced it with a different budget-based approach, with no community or citizen input. Don't know what LePage does if anything at all. The solution is simple. Develop one consumer-based model, independent of political ideology, with continuous measuring of quality and use it consistently over a decade or more so that one can measure and compare results from year to year. Hold politicians and programs accountable.

—jbmaine

DOONESBURY



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