

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Government buying 7 million pounds of ammonia-treated meat byproduct for school lunch program

The US Department of Agriculture is purchasing 7 million pounds of ammonia-treated beef byproduct for use in its national school lunch program from Beef Products Inc. The so-called “Lean Beef Trimmings” is a ground combination of beef scraps, connective tissues and other “trimmings” that are treated with ammonium hydroxide.

The USDA has long used the substance for school lunches and, without including notice on its labels, has mixed it into ground beef. The government spends only three cents per pound less for ground beef cut with the ammoniated mixture.

The company and the government have insisted the ammonia is safe and effectively kills off salmonella and E.coli. Tests conducted between 2005 and 2009 found that pathogens were present in dozens of samples of the product, including two contaminated batches of 27,000 pounds of meat.

Two microbiologists, former Food Safety Inspection Service inspector Carl Custer and Gerald Zernstein, concluded in a recent study that the product was “not nutritionally equivalent” to ground beef and was “high risk.” McDonalds and other major fast-food restaurants have discontinued the use of the material, which resembles a pink slime.

“My objection to having it in the schools is that it’s not meat,” Custer told online publication *thedaily.com*. “It’s more like Jell-O than hamburger, plus it’s treated with ammonia, an additive that is not declared anywhere.”

Ultra-wealthy couple charged with enslaving house

servant

An ultra-wealthy New York woman has been criminally charged with forcing an undocumented immigrant into indentured servitude for nearly six years. Thirty-nine-year-old Annie George and her now deceased husband, Mathai Kolath George, are accused of luring in an Indian immigrant with promises of \$1,000 per month in wages and free housing at the couple’s 34-room mansion. The amount offered was below New York’s minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, about \$1,160 per month in pre-tax earnings.

The Georges’ opulent home, known as the Llenroc mansion, is located just north of Albany. The mansion has a helicopter pad, marble floors, 24-karat gold gilt ceilings, a glass elevator, and 15 fireplaces. It has been valued at \$30 million.

Once she arrived, the victim, identified in court papers only as V.M., was forced to sleep in a closet in the 30,000-square-foot home. She worked 17 hours a day, 7 days a week caring for the Georges’ four young children and performing household duties. She was paid only 85 cents an hour. She was denied any health care, sick days, or personal time off. For the 67 months in which she was kept at the George mansion, V.M. was paid only \$29,000.

Idaho to lower tax rates on the wealthy, corporations

A \$35.7 million tax cut for the wealthiest Idahoans is “roaring through” the legislature, according to the *Spokesman Review*. The cut would lower the state’s top individual income tax rate from 7.8 percent to 7.4

percent. The corporate tax rate would be reduced from 7.6 percent to 7.4 percent.

The measure is endorsed by Governor Butch Otter and co-sponsored by a majority of the House. “The governor has recommended that we not collect this money, that we’re collecting too much,” Republican Rep. Marv Hagedorn commented. Hagedorn is among 40 co-sponsors of the bill.

The bill comes after three years of deep budget reductions to basic programs including Medicaid and public education. Idahoans have voted for school property tax levies repeatedly in an attempt to make up for state-level cuts.

Wage growth sinks in many cities

Online wage database PayScale.com recently released its 2011 index of changes in pay for full-time, private-sector workers across the US. For metropolitan areas, many have had declining wage growth year after year.

At -3.1 percent, Riverside, California registered the worst wage growth in the country. The Inland Empire region, of which Riverside is a part, has an official unemployment rate of 13.2 percent. The city “suffered a tremendous amount with the housing bubble burst” and “has not yet recovered from the wreckage in the housing market, both for real estate and construction,” PayScale analyst Katie Bardaro said. The collapse of the housing market has depressed wages in Riverside by nearly 7 percent since 2008.

Baltimore, Tampa, and Dallas all saw wages decline by 0.1 percent. Wages nationwide are declining relative to inflation on gas, food, and other basic necessities.

Washington Army base altered soldier psychiatric diagnoses to save money

The Army has removed the Tacoma, Washington Joint Base Lewis-McChord medical chief while the Western Region Medical Command investigates the cases of 14 soldiers. Many soldiers have had diagnoses

of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) altered by the base psychiatry team so that they would not be able to receive full disability pensions.

The *Olympian* newspaper reported that an internal memo from the base’s Madigan Army Medical Center revealed that “members of the forensic psychiatry team urged behavioral health professionals to consider the long-term costs of a PTSD diagnosis on taxpayers.”

The Army is also investigating why the base medical center closed an intensive care outpatient clinic in 2010. According to the *Olympian*, “Sources told Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, the unit was shuttered because it was diagnosing post-traumatic stress too frequently.”

The Madigan center, named after a World War II officer known as “the father of Army neuropsychiatry,” is one of the largest military hospitals on the west coast. Joint Base Lewis-McChord has been the site of numerous suicides and violent episodes over the past several years. It is also the base of the infamous Afghan “kill team.” Its soldiers have been deployed repeatedly to both Iraq and Afghanistan.



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