

Notes on the social crisis in America

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FEMA denies aid to Illinois, Missouri for tornado damage

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has denied requests for disaster aid from storm-ravaged Illinois and Missouri. The two states were told to instead apply for loans from the federal government through the Small Business Administration.

Illinois was denied twice for FEMA aid following the February 29 tornado. The small southern town of Harrisburg was hardest hit, with seven residents killed in a single neighborhood, and hundreds of houses destroyed.

FEMA explained the rejection by insisting that the state had the resources to recover on its own. Illinois has among the worst state budget deficits in the country. "I am very disappointed with this decision and do not believe it reflects the reality and devastation on the ground," Illinois Governor Pat Quinn said.

Philadelphia to ban feeding the homeless

On March 14, Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter announced a prohibition against community organizations feeding the homeless and hungry at city parks. The new law will take effect after a 30-day comment period.

Philadelphia follows Atlanta, Nashville, Dallas, and at least 20 other cities in implementing crackdowns on feeding of the homeless. Houston is currently considering restrictions on the distribution of homemade food.

The law is aimed at clearing homeless people out of the downtown area where the city is opening a new

court building, hotel, and other costly projects. Nutter justified the ban by saying that the homeless should eat indoors, where they can receive mental health evaluations and other social services. "Too often, I've driven past Love Park or along the Ben Franklin Parkway and seen people lined up in front of a van, shivering in the cold and rain, huddled in the dark. And sometimes they're lined up but no van or car ever appears," he said at a press conference.

Organizations that feed the homeless will be required to take "food safety courses" through the city to obtain permits, and they must provide a hand-washing facility on site. Groups will be subject to unannounced inspections.

The plan has provoked anger among advocates for the homeless, who spoke out against the ban at a public hearing March 15. "The mayor stated clearly in his press conference the goal is to get them indoors, they are not a 'them,' they are not a 'those,' they are citizens of this community and just like anyone else has a right to eat in this park, our homeless citizens have a right to eat in this park," said Brian Jenkins, executive director of Chosen 300 Ministries.

Advocates pointed out that the city does not have enough indoor space to serve the people in need of help. Jenkins and other community organizers have vowed to continue handing out food at Ben Franklin Parkway.

80,000 to lose unemployment benefits in South Carolina

Nearly 80,000 long-term jobless workers will see their extended federal unemployment benefits cut by the end of 2012. Some 6,500 will lose their benefits in

April, the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce announced March 15. Seven other states are cutting long-term unemployment benefits, pointing to falling official jobless figures.

South Carolina currently has an unemployment rate of 9.3 percent, a full percentage point higher than the national average, though down from a high of 12 percent in 2010. “I’m a little surprised,” Wells Fargo economist Mark Vitner told Columbia’s *The State* newspaper. “You’ve got a lot of rural areas in the state, some of which have the highest unemployment rates in the country.”

Two-thirds of the state’s counties report jobless rates above 10 percent. Marion County, the worst off in the state, has a rate of 19.2 percent. “There aren’t a whole lot of jobs out there in a lot of these counties,” Vitner said. “There may not be any jobs there for them to take.”

Physical restraints used extensively in public schools

Tens of thousands of students, most of them disabled or autistic, are physically restrained and secluded in public schools, the Department of Education reports. The federal government has no standards on the use of restraints.

Children as young as preschool age were duct-taped to their chairs and made to sit alone for hours in locked rooms. A 2009 Government Accountability Office study found “hundreds of cases of alleged abuse and death related to the use of these methods on schoolchildren during the past two decades.”

A mother in Kentucky recently reported going to the school and finding her autistic son stuffed in a canvas duffel bag in the hallway.

Maureen Fitzgerald, director of disability rights with advocacy group Arc, told the Associated Press that reports of such incidents should be “minuscule.” Abuses occur when workers “are put in situations where they’re not trained, they don’t have the support they need and things get out of control because they don’t know how to manage the kids, and they do whatever they can to keep everybody calm and safe... and that’s when people start getting hurt.”

Missouri House passes budget plan, cuts health care for the blind

The Missouri House on Thursday passed a \$24 billion budget that eliminates previously proposed cuts to higher education, in part by terminating a health care program for the blind.

Democratic Governor Jay Nixon had originally proposed cutting more than \$100 million from higher education. This was partially offset with funds from the national mortgage settlement. The state faces a budget shortfall of \$500 million.

The House has attempted to cut some \$68 million from the budget, including a cut of \$28 million to services for blind residents who do not qualify for Medicaid. Some 2,800 blind people rely on the program.

House budget chairman Rep. Ryan Silvey (Republican – Kansas City) praised the proposal. “We have to make tough decisions in this body,” he said. The budget contains no tax increases.

During deliberation, Silvey suggested that the blind were being given disproportionate care. “You’ve got one particular program that treats one disability so different than everybody else,” he said. If the blind program were eliminated, Silvey added, “You would simply be treated like any other disability.”

Missouri has among the most restrictive Medicaid eligibility requirements in the country. For a single blind or disabled person to qualify for Medicaid, they would have to earn less than \$9,495 per year. Seventy percent of the blind population is unemployed.



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