

Notes on the social crisis in America

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Investigation into death of homeless St. Louis woman arrested at ER

Anna Brown, a homeless St. Louis woman, died last September after being removed from the St. Mary's Health Center emergency room by police. An autopsy found that Brown, 29, had blood clots in her legs and lungs, and no drugs in her system.

The findings were made public Sunday in an investigative report by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, along with video footage from the incident.

Brown, a mother who had lost custody of her children, was on Medicaid and desperately seeking care. According to the *Post-Dispatch*, "She had already been to two other hospitals that week in September, complaining of leg pain after spraining her ankle." The young woman was in so much pain that she was unable to walk when police arrested her on trespassing and suspicion of drug intoxication.

"She told officers she couldn't get out of the police car, so they dragged her by her arms into the station. They left her lying on the concrete floor of a jail cell, moaning and struggling to breathe," the paper noted. "Just 15 minutes later, a jail worker found her cold to the touch."

Brown's story was a series of tragedies that so often beset the poor. One of ten children, she gave birth to her first child at age 18. Her second was born 9 years later. At that time, she was raising them alone, when a tornado destroyed her home. Shortly after, she lost her job at a sandwich shop. Then came electric, gas, and water shutoffs. Her children were taken away from her when social workers found unsafe conditions. Brown was left homeless after the home was condemned.

Her death bears similarities to that of Edith Isabel Rodriguez, a "quasi-transient" mother of three who died of a ruptured bowel as she was being placed in a squad car outside the Los Angeles' King-Harbor Hospital emergency room in 2007. (See: "Death in Los Angeles hospital exposes social crisis in US")

The Brown family is considering a lawsuit. Personal injury attorney Tom Keefe told the *Post-Dispatch* that a jury may not decide Brown's death warrants a monetary award. "If you kill a homeless man with no job, he's not worth very much," Keefe commented. "But if you wipe out [St. Louis Cardinals star player] Matt Holliday, who is making \$20 million a year, it's worth a lot of money. Even though they are both human beings and both victims, the truth is, death cases are evaluated by the losses you can prove the survivors have suffered."

Brown's mother is caring for her children, now aged 11 and 2.

South Carolina health clinics shuttered, employees left unpaid

Richland Community Health Care Association, which runs four clinics in South Carolina, abruptly shut down operations this month. Employees were not paid their final paychecks and were given no notice that the organization had allowed their insurance premiums to lapse.

"I'm having a baby any day now," Olympia Witherspoon, a laid-off medical case manager told Columbia newspaper *The State* on Wednesday. "I didn't even know that the insurance was canceled until I got this big bill."

"Everybody had direct deposit," physician's assistant Stewart Darby said. "When the money didn't show up, that's when we found out."

Clinic employees were paid through federal grants to provide affordable health care to the poor. The RCHCA was bought out by Eau Claire Cooperative Health Care after a competitive bidding process. According to *The State*, many of the RCHCA employees have been rehired by Eau Claire, but they are missing two or three weeks' pay.

Employees said they have been promised pay since March 9, but no checks have arrived and neither RCHCA executives nor the federal Health Resources and Services Administration, have provided an explanation. "Nobody knows anything, medical assistant Shonta Guyton said. "They don't communicate with us. We're in the dark."

Dawn Bostick, a secretary who was not rehired, said the lack of a final paycheck left her completely unprepared for the wait for unemployment benefits. "I got an eviction notice," she said. "I've got a court date [for the eviction] in five days. They're calling about my car. He wants his whole payment in 15 days. I'm so far behind, I don't know how I'll catch up."

Patrice Robinson, another laid-off worker said, "I've got to pay for the lights, a car payment, child care, food. I don't receive any assistance. My paycheck is how my family survives."

Salt Lake, Utah Boys & Girls Clubs cut food portions as donations sag

Boys & Girls Clubs across the Greater Salt Lake City area are cutting back on snacks and dinner portions for hundreds of poor children. Advocates have warned that many will not eat outside of the clubs once

they go home, leaving the children hungrier.

Across the area, the number of children ages 3 to 18 seeking services at the clubs rose last year by 400, to 1,962. More are expected to enroll this year, although some clubs have had to cap enrollment.

“Most of our kids do eat school breakfast and lunch, and they eat dinner here,” Capitol West club director Maren Miller told the *Salt Lake Tribute* Wednesday. “We have parents that call and say, ‘If you have any leftover food, can you please send some home with the kids.’” Miller said parents may have no money, or they may work multiple jobs and not have time to cook.

“Twenty to 30 percent probably don’t eat at home,” Murray’s Juniors club director Megan Shaw said. “Some save part of their [school] lunch to eat at night.”

Donations dropped after the Utah Food Bank cut snacks and dried goods to the clubs. The food bank said it had suffered a drop in commercial donations.

As need grows, getting food and social services is more difficult than ever. On March 26, Utah Governor Gary Herbert signed into law a new requirement that families seeking welfare assistance must pass drug testing. Under the law, which will take effect later this year, aid applicants will have to fill out a questionnaire dealing with drug use. If an applicant’s answers are deemed suspicious, they will be subject to a drug test. Refusing to take a test could result in loss of benefits.

Washington state headed for record whooping cough cases

Washington’s Health Department has recorded 549 cases of pertussis, or “whooping cough,” in the state in the first three months of this year. The outbreak is projected to exceed the 950 cases documented last year, and the previous record of 1,020 in 2005.

Nationally, the number of cases has been on the increase over the past decade, with 27,550 cases reported in 2010. (See: “Previously eradicated diseases reemerge in US”)

Only an estimated 10 to 15 percent of pertussis cases are reported.

Michele Roberts, immunization program health communication manager for the state Health Department, told the Associated Press Tuesday that pertussis has reached epidemic levels in six counties: Jefferson, Cowlitz, Kittitas, Snohomish, Skagit, and Whatcom. In Cowlitz County, the outbreak has prompted the PeaceHealth St. John hospital to place patients showing symptoms of the virus in isolation.

Arizona Senate approves ban on abortions after 20 weeks

The Arizona Senate voted Tuesday to ban abortions after 20 weeks of

pregnancy. Performing an abortion at or beyond 20 weeks will be a Class 1 misdemeanor under the bill, resulting in six months in jail. While the bill contains an exception for medical emergencies, it does not exempt cases of rape and incest. Planned Parenthood has said the measure makes the state the most restrictive in the nation.

Support for the bill has been overtly religious, anti-scientific and anti-democratic. Justifications for the 20-week cut-off hinge on the argument that by that time, a fetus is sufficiently developed to be able to feel pain.

During floor debate over the bill, HB 2036, opponents argued that the question of ending a pregnancy should be a decision made by a woman in the consultation with her doctor. Republican Senator Steve Yarbrough replied, “There’s a third person in that room. There’s the baby. Who speaks for her, the totally innocent one with no voice? Who has the duty and the right to speak for her? We do.”

Student debt collectors are “incentivized” to violate federal loan laws

Student loan debtors are regularly coerced into paying more per month than they can afford, and more than is required by the federal government, by private debt collectors, who are given incentives from the Education Department to ignore the law.

Bloomberg news reported March 26 that collection companies were offered \$1 billion in commissions, sometimes equaling as much as 20 percent of recoveries. “Former debt collectors said they worked in a ‘boiler-room’ environment,” Bloomberg reported, “where they could earn bonuses of thousands of dollars a month, restaurant gift cards and even trips to foreign resorts if they collected enough from borrowers.”

Under Education Department contracts, collectors were offered a “jackpot” of commissions if they could compel a borrower in default to make nine payments in the span of ten months, thus “rehabilitating” a loan.



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