

WE SAY TEXAS FOSTER CARE

Foster kids pay dearly for oversight gaps

Alexandria Hill paid the price for a state contractor's under abundance of caution in vetting the family it trusted with her care. Alexandria was only 2 when she died July 31 in a Rockdale hospital.

The Texas Mentor foster care agency has a \$10 million contract with the state to place children in foster homes. Yet, the agency admitted that it did not do an adequate job of checking the backgrounds of the family in whose care the toddler was placed.

The state Department of Family and Protective Services has launched a safety review of 114 homes across the state, housing 275 placed by Texas Mentor. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that it took a child's death to initiate the review and legislators should be diligent in seeing to it that the investigation is thorough and follow through with correcting the internal failures that led to this tragedy. Though foster home deaths in Texas should be extremely rare, they are not. The Dallas Morning News reported last week that 10 foster children died under suspicious circumstances in the fiscal year that ended Aug. 31. Four of those deaths were the result of abuse and neglect and the other six are under investigation.

That is obviously 10 too many. There are more than 31,000 children in the state's care and contractors like Texas Mentor collectively take in more than

\$200 million in taxpayer money in return for placing the children.

The criminal history and finances of foster parents and their families are supposed to be reviewed, but Texas Mentor told the American-Statesman's Andrea Ball that the checks on Sherrill Small, the foster parent for Alexandria Hill, and her family were incomplete.

Had the agency looked thoroughly it would have discovered that Sherrill Small, her husband and two daughters had been in trouble with the law. At the time Alexandria Hill was placed in the Smalls' home, Sherrill Small was facing a hot check charge in Travis County. The check in question was written for less than \$50. Foster parents take in \$650 to \$700 a month for taking in a child.

The shaky Small family finances should have been a bright red flag that the family had financial difficulty, but it was not the only danger sign that Texas Mentor missed.

Ball reported earlier this week that state agency workers spoke with or observed 59 children in foster care as a result of Alexandria's death. Of those, two children were removed from one home after investigators discovered that caretakers were using "inappropriate discipline," according to Family and Protective Services spokesman Patrick Crimmins, who declined to provide details.

Meanwhile, Texas Mentor retains its



Alexandria Hill, 2, died July 31 of a traumatic head injury that police say was caused when her foster mother slammed the child's head into the floor. CONTRIBUTED

lucrative contract with the state while an investigation into what went wrong unfolds in Alexandria's case. With \$227 million going to 351 contractors each year, the financial stakes are high. As we noted in a previous editorial, this system has been too lax for too long. Aggressive, independent oversight is nonexistent. Placing foster children is big business and Texas Mentor is only one of the placement agencies that collect the money.

That may have happened accidentally or by legislative design. What-

ever the case, it is past time to fix the deficiencies that obviously exist and that are just as obviously a danger to children for whom the state accepts responsibility.

Texas legislators often like to brag that government ought to be run like a business. If children dying while in the state's custody doesn't move legislators' humanitarian instincts, maybe a focus ought to be placed on how well and how efficiently the contractors perform. No business that expects to survive would dole out more than \$200 million to contractors that it hopes will do the right thing. A business would demand accountability for its money.

In instances where a child dies in state custody, everyone is responsible, but no one is accountable. That's a very convenient arrangement for the contractors, but not so much for the children. The state's obligation is the children, not to the contractors the state hires to put them in foster homes.

Alexandria Hill was put in the state's care for reasons that were beyond her control. At 2, she obviously had no choice in the decisions that cost her her life.

It is simply not enough for those who make policy and those who execute it to say how sorry they are about it all and go on as if it never happened.

We can't keep throwing money away like that. We certainly can't keep throwing away children like that.

YOU SAY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Too many questions

Re: Sept. 15 article, "As Oct. 1 nears, new law baffles."

I appreciate Laylan Copelin's article. It is very helpful to learn of the tremendous complexities of this law. Copelin quotes Robert Mayfield, who has delayed expanding his business because of the uncertainty of the law. Copelin writes that Mayfield's reaction to the health care law may be extreme, but his level of uncertainty about the new rules isn't unusual. Why would it be considered "extreme" for a business owner to protect his business?

What is extreme, in my opinion, is a 1,600-page law with regulations exceeding 20,000 pages.

As the public learns more about this law, it only raises more questions, among others:

- If this law is so good, why is the White House staff exempt?
- Why does Congress' staff get special subsidies paid for by the taxpayer?
- Why are many of the unions now against this law?
- Will this law do more harm than good? The early indications are a big yes.

Dan Meigs
Georgetown

Health article unbalanced

Re: Sept. 15 article, "As Oct. 1 nears, new law baffles."

I cannot believe the one-sided view of the "Health Care In-Depth" – 100 percent from an employer's view and 0 percent on the overall health care issues facing all Americans. What are the benefits? What is the impact to the people instead of companies?

What is most baffling is using a few case studies to insinuate everyone will pay more – shame. Health care is a complex issue, and the American-Statesman fails to give a balanced view. Franklin D. Roosevelt was right: All we have to fear is fear itself.

Francis Rojas
Austin

Hit the road, Mack

Well, now that the Texas football season is over after a thorough trouncing from Ole Miss, it's time for UT coach Mack Brown to go. It seems every football program in the nation is getting better while Texas gets worse. Has anyone posed that question?

Gary Janousek
CoachCubs@aol.com
Pflugerville

Warming statistics shaky

Re: Sept. 16 letter to the editor, "Global warming is real."

The writer simply uses false material to support the global warming theory. In fact, scientists who have long argued that rising CO₂ levels cause warming are now trying to explain why increases in temperature have leveled off despite rising CO₂. The truth

is that we have ways to view climate in long-term historical views, and when we do, we see that the earth is probably at the end of a short-term warming period that will be followed by a long-term cooling period, as has previously happened.

Troy Hill
Troyhill36@yahoo.com
Leander

Vietnam was real failure

Re: Sept. 14 letter to the editor, "Still trying to spin 9/11."

It's ironic the writer would mention the LBJ Library in the same letter where he proclaims the Iraq War the "biggest foreign policy blunder in U.S. history." Perhaps he's never heard of or has forgotten the Vietnam War.

President Lyndon B. Johnson falsely used the second Gulf of Tonkin (non)incident to escalate the war in Southeast Asia. He later said of the episode, "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there."

Over time, LBJ knew we could not win the war. He said to Sen. Eugene McCarthy: "I know we oughtn't be there, but I can't get out. I just can't be the architect of surrender." Because of that sentiment, 58,220 of our servicemen were killed, and more than 300,000 were wounded.

Our goal in Iraq was to topple Saddam Hussein's government and help establish a democracy – we succeeded. Our goal in Vietnam was to preserve the South Vietnam government – we failed.

Timothy E. McDaniel
abittercup@gmail.com
Austin

Show respect for Mueller

Re: Sept. 11 Ken Herman column, "Council mappers draw the resentful."

Ken Herman is so good at putting a human face on a news story. His article describing the interactions between members of the City Council redistricting committee showed them to be petty and adolescent. They

seem to have a "Mueller" problem.

We have lived in East Austin for more than 30 years, and the Mueller development has been a blessing. We now have walking trails, waterfalls, wildflowers, a new children's museum, and open spaces for playing soccer that are enjoyed by the multiple races and religions of Austin. We had an airport with private plane owners who liked to work on their engines at 3 a.m. and noise from commercial airlines.

We are thankful for the homeowners at Mueller who moved to Central Austin rather than Westlake, where they could have paid their taxes. Every area of this town has their strengths and deserve the respect of this committee. If you are not going to be respectful and positive, resign.

Laura Eisenberg
Austin

Thanks to wallet heroes

Many thanks to the couple that found my wallet at the Round Rock Outlets on Sunday. Your actions changed my frustration at the situation into happiness. It is so wonderful to know that there are people out there like you. I hope there will be many good karma points in your bank for these actions.

T. Harvey
Austin

CONTACT US

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OTHERS SAY GINGER FRANKS

Special Contributor

A quality education starts with teacher pay

I started teaching when I was 22 years old. I taught English and speech therapy to special education students at Woden Independent School District in rural East Texas. My first school year teaching was the 1982-83 academic year, and I made \$11,100. In two years, my salary was raised to \$17,000 because the state increased the base pay for teachers. I was lucky to receive that raise.

This is my 32nd year teaching special education, and my average annual salary has remained at about \$46,000 for the past 11 years. Despite receiving exemplary job evaluations, I have not had a significant raise since 2002.

Like most teachers, I entered public education because I love children, and I have a burning desire to inspire students to be successful – not because I expected to get rich. Many educators share this philosophy, but we also want to feel valued in our profession.

I have never blamed the school districts entirely for low teacher salaries. Districts do the best they can with the funding provided by the state. Texas is simply not a top spender in public education. In February, a judge ruled the state's school finance system unconstitutional as it fails to provide adequate and equitable funding. The state was recently ranked ninth in the top 10 states that spend the least on public education per pupil, according to a U.S. Census Bureau report.

According to the Texas Education Agency, the average teacher salary for beginning teachers was \$40,911 for the 2011-12 school year and \$58,031 for teachers with more than 20 years of experience.

The average superintendent salary for 2012-2013 was \$127,358, a 3.5 percent increase from 2011-2012, according to a report from the Texas Association of School Boards and Texas Association of School Administrators. Average superintendent salaries range from \$86,782 in districts with fewer than 500 students to \$281,722 in districts with more than 50,000 students.

The majority of a school district's budget goes toward employee salaries, but you would never know it when it comes to teacher pay. In 2007, my annual salary was \$46,630. Last year, I received a salary increase of \$340 – my first raise in five years. Most teachers do not see their salary increase significantly, even after reaching 20 years of experience.

Many rural school districts

across the state do not allocate the funds to pay teachers more. Some are only able to pay \$500 to \$1,000 a year above the state minimum, if anything. And when teachers factor in rising health insurance premiums, they really don't see a difference in their paychecks. Certainly, many Texas professionals and their families are also feeling the effects of these same economic issues, but I am convinced that to remain nationally and globally competitive, our future generations will need a world-class education. To retain world-class educators, we need to assess what a professional can earn in teaching versus other professions.

Teacher salary affects teacher quality. The reason Texas has difficulties in retaining new, younger public education teachers is because it is quite difficult to support oneself and a family on a teacher's salary. The work demands and stress of the job, along with the low pay, make it harder for them to justify their love of teaching children.

Oftentimes, a teacher with two to three years of experience will leave for a job that offers more pay, less stress and better work hours. Despite what some might think, teachers who are off work during the summer are not paid for that time. Some teachers even get part-time jobs to supplement the income lost during this time.

When teachers take on the incredible responsibility of educating our future leaders, it's not an eight-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week gig. It's a commitment from the heart. Teachers want their students to grow, to feel validated, to love learning, so they spend their nights and weekends crafting lesson plans, grading papers and volunteering their time to extracurricular activities.

Teachers believe all children deserve a happy, safe, supportive learning environment, so they spend their own money on classroom decorations, project supplies, and meals – even toothbrushes – for students in need.

Teaching is an honorable profession, but society does not always treat it as such. Teachers need to know they are supported by the community, parents, business leaders and lawmakers. If we truly want quality teachers in the classroom, we have to give them quality pay because teachers deserve it.

Franks, a 31-year education veteran, is a special education teacher and president of the Association of Texas Professional Educators.

