

Other Viewpoints

Nursing homes hold unknown risk

Like anybody else, registered sex offenders need access to long-term care when illness or disability necessitates it. But state officials should decide whether it's wise for such offenders to live among vulnerable Kansans in nursing homes and, if so, whether more disclosure should be required. As it is, the privacy of offenders appears to trump the safety of other patients, staff and visitors.

The uncomfortable subject came to light in an article by Hurst Laviana in the Sunday *Eagle* revealing that seven registered sex offenders were living at Wichita Nursing Center at 2840 S. Hillside before the state revoked its license over numerous violations. The *Eagle* also found that, according to the state's registered offender database, a dozen other such offenders — individuals convicted of crimes ranging from rape to aggravated indecent liberties with a child under 14 to lewd and lascivious behavior — were living in nursing homes around the state.

The article prompted questions that are hard to answer, at least in part because of privacy laws: How did four sex offenders from Oklahoma end up in a Wichita nursing home? Why would nine sex offenders statewide in their 40s and 50s need the level of care found in nursing homes, which most often serve the frail elderly? (In 2006 the Government Accountability Office found that 57 percent of 700 sex offenders living in nursing homes nationwide were younger than 65.) Where in Kansas and Missouri have the seven offenders in the Wichita center since moved?

When this issue comes up, someone always argues that an offender ill or disabled enough to need a nursing home probably poses no threat. But that's small comfort when the resident at risk is your loved one. And as Wes Bledsoe, a national advocate of nursing home regulation based in Oklahoma, has argued: "When you put predators in with prey, someone's going to get bit."

Especially amid the ongoing downturn and state budget pinch, it's hard to imagine the Kansas Legislature following Oklahoma's good intentions and passing a law to provide a nursing home (unbuilt so far) exclusively for those convicted of sex crimes.

So it likely will come down to disclosure. State and national offender registries are available to anyone online. But is that enough transparency? Shouldn't nursing homes be required to check the database before they admit a sex offender, and then advise other residents and potential residents of the offenders' presence?

In any case, the issue of what to do about sex offenders in nursing homes is due some attention in Topeka, including from the 2012 Legislature.

As state Rep. Bob Bethell, R-Alden, told the *Eagle*: "We want to make sure they get the care they need, but we also want to make sure individuals in nursing facilities get the protection they need."

Kansans seeking long-term care for vulnerable loved ones shouldn't have to wonder whether they will be sharing a room or wing with a rapist or child molester.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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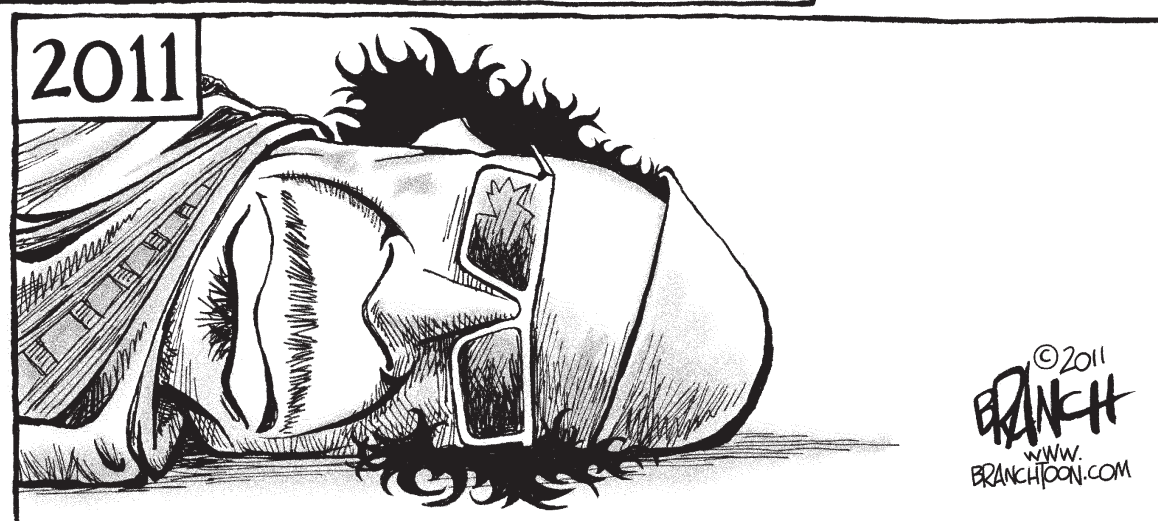
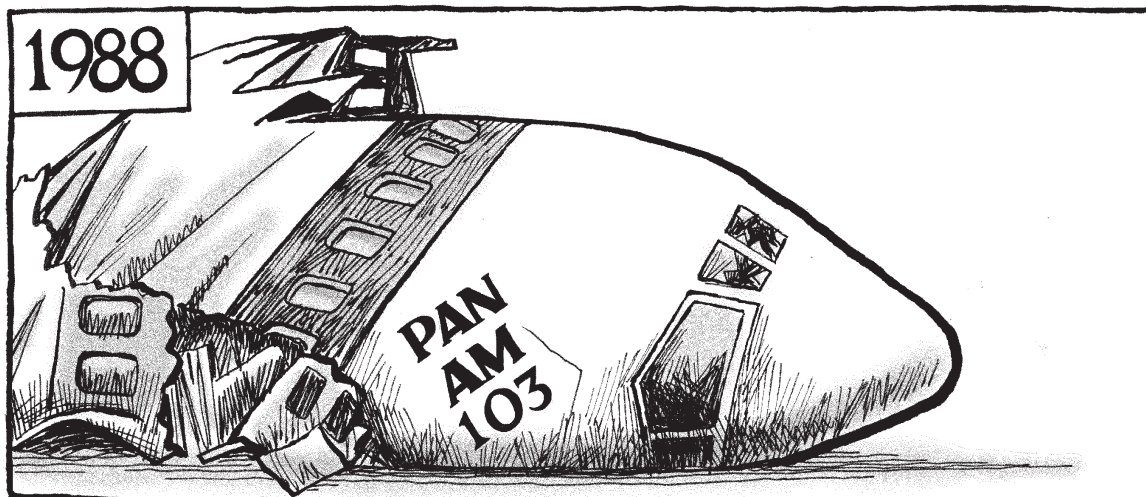
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Sinkholes may not be a minor problem

I have often wondered if some day we are going to have a big problem if we keep removing so many things from under the earth of this old planet.

When I think about all of the coal, water, gas, oil and other things taken from under the ground, it just seems that eventually something's got to give. Maybe someday the ground beneath our feet will just collapse into giant sinkholes.

That reminds me of several years ago when I was still working at the old St. Thomas Hospital and took a night course in creative writing at Colby Community College. One of the class assignments was to read newspaper articles to get an idea and to write a short story using that idea.

The story that caught my attention was about giant sinkholes that had appeared various places in Kansas. One was right in the middle of a highway.

Because those sinkholes were located in an area where there were numerous oil wells, some people speculated that the holes were caused by the rapid removal of oil in those areas. Of course, that idea was soon shot down by various authorities.

There isn't room here to tell the whole story I wrote about sinkholes, but I'll try to tell the main parts of it to give you an idea of what it



Marj Brown

• Marj's Snippets

contained.

It began in the fictitious town of Kellyville. George Kelly, a lawyer living there, was a descendent of the founder of the town. George was very proud of that fact, so he did everything he possibly could for the town including serving as president of the Kellyville City Council.

When George heard that the Kansas legislature was about to pass a law that would tax all Kansas towns to pay for the repair of sinkholes, he was appalled. Kellyville had never had sinkholes, so why should they have to pay to repair them?

With the consent of the city council, George went to Topeka to protest this injustice before the legislature. He then talked several others from Kellyville into coming to Topeka to protest on the capitol steps with signs. This, of course, went on for weeks. Also, since George had taken his new blonde secretary along to

Topeka with him, his wife became jealous and sued him for divorce. His law practice also suffered, and he lost most of his clients.

Finally, he was successful and the bill passed with an attachment that the town of Kellyville would not have to pay the tax, but would not receive funds to repair sinkholes if they ever had any. George was elated.

As he drove home from Topeka, scenes went through his mind of the members of the city council hefting him on their shoulders and carrying him through the halls of the courthouse. George's dreams were interrupted when he came to the sign that read, "You Are Now Entering Kellyville." He noticed that the sign sat a little lop-sided, and, as he looked off into the distance, he saw the people of Kellyville wandering around in a field and looking down into a hole. He soon discovered that the whole town had sunk into a giant sinkhole, buildings and all.

Oh, I guess I forgot to mention that the title of the story is, "You Can Fight the Tax Man." However, I guess it's not always a good idea.

Marj Brown has lived in Colby for 60+ years and has spent a good deal of that time writing about people and places here. She says it's one of her favorite things to do.

Fly your fanny flag high

Kansas farmers have access to a safety tool that should always be used. The slow-moving vehicle (SMV) emblem can save lives and machinery.

A slow-moving vehicle emblem (fanny flag) is designed for one reason — to notify the public that the vehicle motorists are approaching is not traveling more than 25 miles per hour, says Holly Higgins, Kansas Farm Bureau safety director. That in turn allows them to slow down and proceed with caution because the vehicle ahead is moving slowly.

"Once an approaching motorist sees the flashing lights and SMV sign, the driver can react in a defensive way that will keep both operators safe," Higgins says. "We find that when you mix these two vehicles together without the proper warning devices in place a number of things can happen."

One such example is a motorist who pops up over a hill traveling 65 miles per hour and finds a tractor moving at 20 miles per hour. The driver of the auto or truck may be forced to run into the ditch, the back of the tractor or into the other lane of oncoming traffic.

"Hazard lights and SMVs are there to prevent these types of accidents," Higgins says.

Anyone operating a slow-moving vehicle be advised, the fluorescent orange emblem must be properly mounted on the back of your vehicle. Every farm tractor manufactured or assembled after Jan. 1, 1975, shall be equipped with hazard warning lights that are visible



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

from a distance of not less than 1,000 feet to the front and rear in normal sunlight, which are to be displayed whenever such a vehicle is operated upon a highway.

One alarming trend that has occurred in Kansas is the misuse of these signs. The emblems have been found nailed to fence posts, in front of driveways, as markers for washed out areas in the road and in one instance, on cattle pens in a feedlot.

Use of slow-moving vehicle emblems in such a manner gives the motoring public a mistaken impression of what is on the road in front of them. They drive up slowly on a sign and assume a tractor or some other farm implement is going down the road in front of them. The next time they see the bright orange emblem, they may think it is something else and crash into the back of a slow moving vehicle.

Slow-moving vehicle emblems help eliminate such accidents all together. For those producers, or anyone else operating slow moving vehicles, you can purchase them at your local

machinery dealer or farm-supply stores.

Use common sense when it comes to displaying your slow-moving vehicle emblems, Higgins advises. She used the example of a farmer using a stinger on the back of a tractor to haul big round bales.

"What happens if you lift such a bale up for transportation?" the safety spokesperson asks. "You can't see the SMV emblem on the back of the tractor, right?"

So what's the answer?

Take a slow-moving vehicle emblem that has a steel rod or wooden stake attached and stick it into the back of the hay bale. And before you head down the road, turn on the flashing amber lights.

If a farmer or rancher has the slow-moving vehicle emblem, his lights flashing and someone hits him from the rear, he's done all he can, Higgins says.

"Proper installation and maintenance of SMVs isn't intended to make anyone's life more complicated," Higgins says. "They're intended to save lives and reduce accidents. If you don't keep your slow-moving vehicle emblems clean and in place, you're putting yourself in a position that can be avoided."

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

