

Other Viewpoints

Kansas' disabled waiting for budget

Before lawmakers finalize the state budget, they need to address the long list of Kansans with physical disabilities who are waiting for help. At the least, lawmakers had better be ready if the federal government sues the state.

About 3,400 people with physical disabilities are on waiting lists for services. Many have been on the lists for two or more years. This appears to violate the Americans With Disabilities Act and court rulings, including the U.S. Supreme Court's 1999 Olmstead decision.

Since 2009, Kansas advocacy groups and families have filed more than 600 complaints with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights. Officials recently met with the Brownback administration about the waiting lists.

But the office was unable to negotiate a consent decree with the administration and has referred the matter to the U.S. Department of Justice.

"The government's goal was to protect the rights of the physically disabled and at the same time to seek a cost-effective solution and to avoid litigation," Barry Grissom, U.S. attorney for Kansas, said in a statement. "Unfortunately, those negotiations were not successful."

Grissom's office is now discussing the next step. If that is a lawsuit, as seems certain, it could be costly.

Georgia had to spend nearly \$100 million over the past three years on additional services for the disabled as a result of a settlement with the federal government, the Kansas Health Institute News Service reported.

Shannon Jones, executive director of the Statewide Independent Living Council of Kansas, said Kansas' waiting lists could be eliminated with \$33 million in additional state funding. She's frustrated by the state's obstinacy.

"We are going to spend more money on a lawsuit with the federal government instead of spending it on people waiting for services for three years," she told the *Lawrence Journal-World*. "It just makes me sick to my stomach."

Gov. Sam Brownback argued in a statement that Kansas is "in full compliance with all federal requirements," and he noted that he inherited the waiting lists from former Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, who is now Health and Human Services secretary.

The Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services also has defended the waiting lists by citing the state's past budget problems. But the state currently has a significant surplus. And instead of directing some of that money to the waiting lists, Brownback and lawmakers are focused on cutting taxes.

As House Minority Leader Paul Davis, D-Lawrence, told the *Journal-World*: "At a time when we have \$500 million in the bank, it is very difficult for us to look at people who are on a waiting list and say, 'We don't have the ability to help you.'"

The courts won't buy that either.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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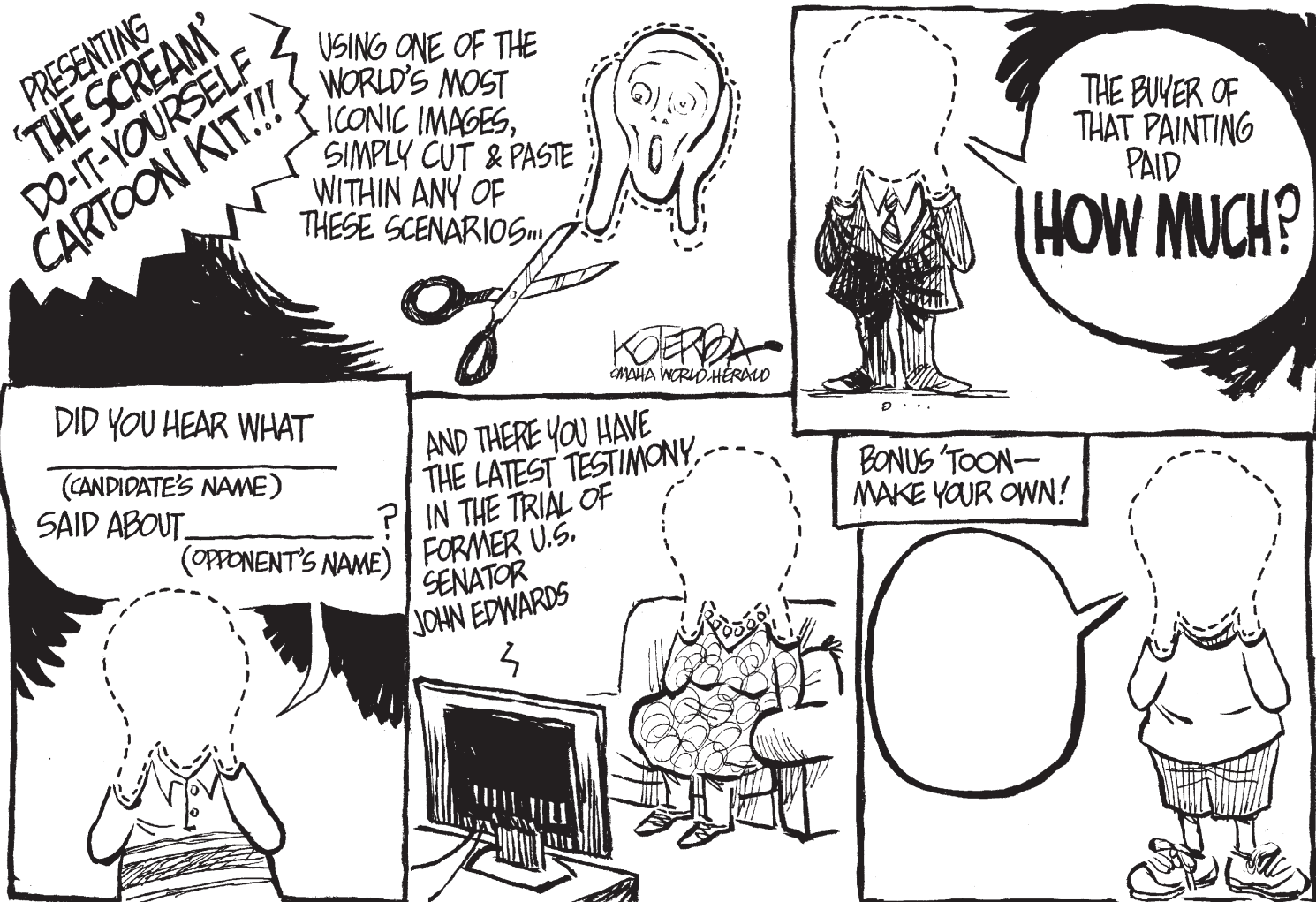
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Health care questions not what they seem

This past week, my congressman's update on the federal health care law arrived in my mailbox. In small print under the return address was a note saying that the mailing was "prepared, published and mailed at taxpayer expense."

This report and its disingenuous claims require further scrutiny.

Take, for example, his "fact" that President Obama's health care law raids \$500 billion from Medicare. This sleight of hand assumes, maybe correctly, that many folks don't know the difference between Medicare Advantage and traditional Medicare.

The Kaiser Foundation put out an excellent "fact sheet" on Medicare Advantage in November. Under these plans, seniors can opt to obtain coverage through private insurance companies. Twenty-five percent of seniors nationwide do so. The number in Kansas is 10 percent, less in rural areas. For a number of reasons, some having to do with administrative costs and others with benefits such as subsidized gym memberships, these plans have become much more costly for the federal government.

The Affordable Care Act doesn't cut any money from traditional Medicare, also known as original Medicare, which covers over 90 percent of seniors in the 1st District. All of the cuts come from Medicare Advantage. The impression left by the mailer that the Affordable Care Act guts Medicare is patently false.

The congressman then goes on to cite "non-partisan Congressional Budget Office" statistics that the law will cause Medicaid costs to increase \$343 billion in the next decade. He conveniently ignores that the same office es-



Alan Jilka

• A Voice of Reason

timates that the Affordable Care Act itself will reduce our federal deficit by approximately \$940 billion over the same decade. The office is either a credible source of information or not. Which is it?

He continues and criticizes the implementation of an Independent Payment Advisory Board to try to cut down the abuse of Medicare and set guidelines on what should or should not be covered. The Board is patterned after the Base Closure and Realignment Commissions set up by former President Reagan and used successfully by successive presidents to politicize decisions on closing bases. The congressman claims that this provision of the law will "end Medicare as we know it."

Of course, nowhere in the mailer, or in any of his previous ones, has the congressman explained or defended his vote last year for "RyanCare." Rep. Paul Ryan's proposal to eliminate Medicare and replace it with a voucher system. Given that the 1st has one of the highest median ages of any congressional district in the country, many of his constituents would likely be interested in an explanation of their congressman's vote to "end Medicare as we know it." Ryan's proposal was so swiftly and roundly discredited that Senate Republicans protested vociferously when Majority Leader

Harry Reid brought the bill to a vote in the Senate.

Manipulations of the facts continue. He again cites budget office statistics estimating that as many as 20 million people could lose their employer-based insurance, neglecting to mention that they would be shifted to other plans.

It would be nice to receive a mailing from one's federal legislator with the genuine intent to inform on what's happening in Washington. But the congressman's single-issue mailing here is nothing more than a campaign mailer at public expense. The cost of preparing, printing and mailing a fancy brochure on expensive card stock to every household in the district runs to nearly \$100,000. The congressman's frequent rants about wasteful federal spending clearly don't extend to the unlimited franking privileges enjoyed by federal lawmakers.

The mailer includes a card with three questions that can be returned, making it appear he's interested in constituent feedback. One of the questions asks whether an individual approves taking \$500 billion from Medicare to pay for the new health care law. If you don't understand the difference between Medicare and Medicare Advantage, and decide to return the card saying you oppose the cuts, you're ripe for another mailer soliciting a campaign contribution.

At least the congressman will have to pay for that mailing himself.

Alan Jilka is a former Salina city commissioner and mayor. He was the Democratic nominee for Congress in the 1st District in 2010.

Grassroots journalism remains essential

People in Kansas, and across this country, depend on strong community journalism to keep them informed and connected to one another.

In spite of all the inroads with social media, many who live in rural areas across Kansas still rely on hometown newspapers like the *Hoxie Sentinel* where I grew up.

Just like the local grocery, school or courthouse, inhabitants of rural Kansas consider their community newspaper vital. Some even believe if they lose their paper, they could lose their entire town.

While I was in southwestern Kansas a couple of weeks ago, a long-time cattleman friend told me he'd be lost without his weekly paper.

"Just like my livestock," he said, "we need to nurture this process. Folks gotta support their local paper — advertising and subscriptions — just like they have to support other businesses up and down Main Street."

Community newspapers report the "real news": What's really happening in a small town or village. You remember, the local news — the births, deaths, weddings, city council meetings, high school events, sporting events — they cover it all.

As a youngster growing up in Sheridan County, I could catch up on all the events going on in all of the villages in my county including Seguin, Studley, Menlo and Selden. While these towns were too small to have their own newspapers, stringers (usually a community volunteer with a flair for writing) submitted their local news to the *Sentinel* each week. Each community had a column, and the



John Schlageck

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Kansas Farm Bureau

dinner parties, who visited whom and the weekly rainfall reports were found by reading the "Seguin Items" from my little burg of 50 people.

Vona Lee Dempewolf was a crack reporter and kept everyone in the know. Many of her sources went unnamed, and some of this news was gathered by listening in on the party line. That's when six or seven families shared the same telephone line. If two people were having a conversation and a third party lifted the phone receiver, he or she could listen in on the conversation. Now that's another story in itself.

But back to local newspapers, which remain the voice of rural communities. Today's volunteer organizations should make it a point to visit with the newspapers in their region. Cultivating first-name relationships with reporters, editors and publishers is vital to getting the word out on what your organization is doing. It's all part of the process of community — letting people know what you're all about.

While much of today's big city and national media have a less than stellar reputation, it's different in small towns. In small towns, people know their reporters and editors. One of

the best ways for anyone in public life to connect with constituents is through community newspapers.

Coverage is different, too. Community papers report the facts. Sometimes the large metropolitan papers miss the point and end up talking about themselves. They make the news — they become the news.

Today, avenues for delivering news continue to expand. Social media continues to explode, especially among the younger crowd. Still, 171 million people in the United States read a newspaper — in print or on line — each week. More than 48 million read a paper daily.

Although there is no doubt print newspaper readership is declining, reports about the pending death of the newspaper industry are exaggerated. Given the fragmentation of media choices, printed newspapers are holding onto their audiences relatively well. And nowhere is this more true than in rural states like Kansas.

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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