



David Lias
Between The Lines

No immunity from hunger in South Dakota

There's good news, and not so good news in South Dakota.

The good news is that unemployment state-wide is somewhere around 5 percent, compared with double-digit unemployment in some states. In fact, as of October, South Dakota had the third best employment rate in the nation.

The bad news: nationwide, food stamp use is soaring. And it appears that our state isn't immune from that trend.

According to a story in Wednesday's Sioux Falls Argus Leader, Food stamps are putting supper on the table for more South Dakota families, and the usage has soared in Sioux Falls, home of the state's most robust economy.

Statewide use of the government benefit jumped 34 percent this fall compared to a year ago, and in Minnehaha County, the rate rose 52 percent.

"Obviously, it's the hard economic times. Some folks who were always eligible just scraped by and did not apply. Now, they can't just scrape by anymore," said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, deputy secretary of the South Dakota Department of Social Services in Pierre.

The food stamp program was once scorned as a failed welfare scheme. Today, across the United States, it helps feed one in eight Americans and one in four children.

It has grown so rapidly in places so diverse that it is becoming nearly as ordinary as the groceries it buys. More than 36 million people use inconspicuous plastic cards for staples like milk, bread and cheese, swiping them at counters in blighted cities and in suburbs pocked with foreclosure signs.

In South Dakota, more than one out of 10 people now use food stamps, which give eligible households an average of \$319 a month for groceries. The income limit for a family of four to qualify is \$2,389 a month or \$28,668 a year.

In Minnehaha County, which by far has the most robust economy of all regions of South Dakota, participation is 8 percent, but it's risen from fewer than 12,000 residents to more than 18,000 from September 2008 to 2009.

Nationwide, virtually all food stamp users have incomes near or below the federal poverty line. What's alarming is the range of people struggling with basic needs.

They include single mothers and married couples, the newly jobless and the chronically poor, longtime recipients of welfare checks and workers whose reduced hours or slender wages leave pantries bare.

Steffen Schmidt, a professor of political science at Iowa State University and a chief political and international correspondent, notes that these numbers are very disturbing for several reasons.

First, there are parts of American society where poverty, welfare and food stamps are institutionalized. These are centers of "multigenerational unemployment," including large swaths of the rural and largely black South, Appalachia and many areas of large cities including entire cities such as East St. Louis and Detroit (which was just awarded the top spot for "America's Most Miserable Cities," by Forbes).

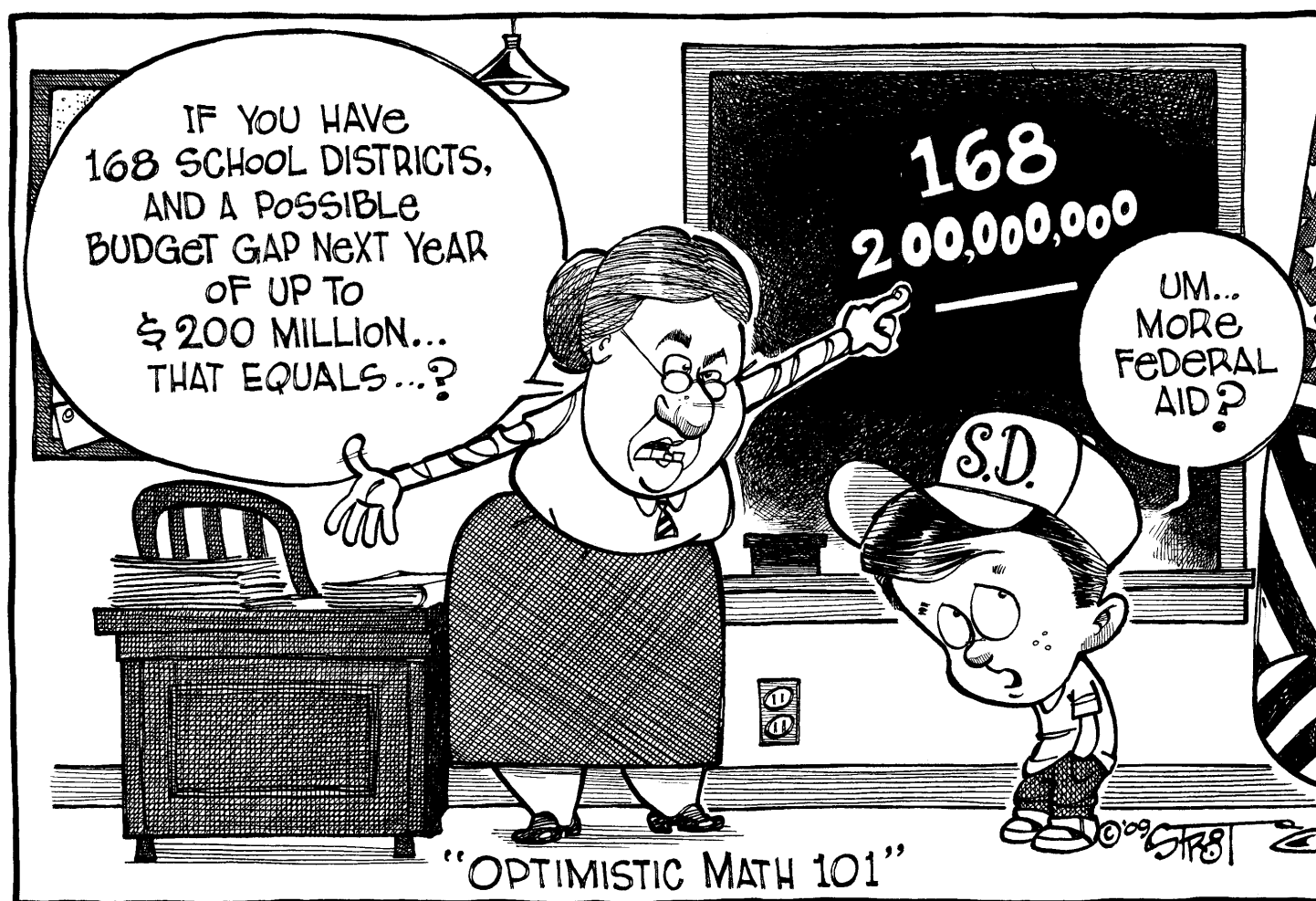
Second, the American practice of living off credit and having no fall-back during lean times is proving to be a disaster even for middle class people during a strong recession.

Third, in spite of a large surplus labor force in many areas of the United States, there are almost no incentives for companies to locate in these labor-rich zones. Minimum wage, OSHA, environmental regulations, poor infrastructure and high crime rates make it unattractive to hire. The educational deficiencies and lack of work histories of many of the long-term unemployed make them largely unsuitable for 21st century work.

Fourth, there are arguments put forth by market-oriented think tanks and politicians that food stamps are no different from the welfare programs which were criticized by President Bill Clinton as creating "dependency" and freezing in place individuals who could and should move on to improve their lives.

Fifth, in a post-industrial economy such as the United States, where are the massive number of jobs going to come from to hire the unemployed and underemployed, and create jobs for the young workers waiting to enter the labor force for the first time?

According to Schmidt, these very troubling conditions will clearly require us to radically re-engineer our educational systems from kindergarten through graduate school and redesign the economy for an "abundant jobs" 21st century. The painful test will be whether we are up for such profound changes.



When Bob helps with housekeeping, the 'burden' grows

Lately I've been reading and hearing so much about "shared responsibility in the home" that I finally decided to take some of the burden of housekeeping off Phyllis's shoulders.

Knowing that the shock of abrupt involvement on my part might be too traumatic for her, I thought it best to sneak into the process gradually. I didn't want to appear that the work she's been doing alone all these years is not consequential nor difficult.

Because she gets up an hour or so ahead of me each morning, she necessarily delays making the bed until I am awake and out of the room. Relieving her of that little task seemed like a good way to begin my wife saving gesture.

When I was a new private in the army some years ago, I prided myself on the ability to make up my cot neater and tauter than pictured in the training manual. I could pull the sheets and blanket so tightly that a two-bit piece dropped on the bed would bounce almost three feet in the air.

I bounded out of bed 20 minutes earlier than usual. It took me a little while to

recall how to make the military-style envelope fold at the corners. But once I figured it out, I was on my way. I had to admit that the half hour it took me was a trifle long, but the artistic effect was worth the effort. Strangely though, when I tried the money-dropping test, I didn't get the same results as I did back in '42. I'm sure it was because those new copper-centered quarters don't bounce as well as the old silver ones.

After the bed-making triumph, I decided to help in the kitchen and for breakfast Eggs Benedict sounded good to me. Phyllis searched through her card file for the recipe. For this special occasion, I asked her to get me a couple skillets, for poaching the eggs and frying the ham, a small saucepan and wooden spoon for making the Hollandaise sauce. I told her she could toast the English muffins so she could feel she

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Writer At Large

entirely correct. I have never seen a mad dog, but I understand they froth at the mouth. So do "mad" washing machines! I was up to my knees in frothy foam and when Phyllis returned, she found me scooping suds out of the utility room with a snow shovel.

There was a filmy coating of soap on everything. Something went wrong with the wash though. Everything came out a dull pink, including towels, pillow slips, Phyllis's bras and a bright red sweatshirt I'd only worn once.

During the day I helped my appreciative wife with several other tasks and I learned a lot, but I think Phyllis was beginning to feel her security threatened by my efforts to help her. She seemed to plead with me not to invade her bailiwick. Actually, the way she put it was:

"You have your work and I have mine. Please remove me from your succor list." So, if that's the way she feels about it, who am I to disturb her as she fulfills her conjugal obligations? I wouldn't want anybody to accuse me of chauvinism.

My supposition was not

contributed. I don't want to belabor the outcome, but something must have been wrong with the stove because I scorched the sauce. Burnt Hollandaise does not smell particularly delightful, and while I was opening the windows, the poached eggs got hard-boiled and the ham began to smoke. But, I brightened Phyllis's morning by quipping: "Ah, there's no place like home for the Hollandaise!" She didn't laugh much. So I piled the pans in the sink and poured a couple bowls of Grape Nuts.

Phyllis generously offered to clean up the kitchen so I could help elsewhere. With breakfast out of the way, I volunteered to do the laundry while Phyllis went to the supermarket. I couldn't find the instruction book on operating the washing machine but decided on my own that if one cup of soap was good, two would be better.

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How to W.R.A.K. up random acts of kindness

When I first learned about the W.R.A.K. Coffee Club, I whined a bit. You see, W.R.A.K., a.k.a. Weekly Random Acts of Kindness, is a ministry of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church that meets weekly at a Nebraska City coffee shop. This made it almost impossible for me to participate in person.

So the innovator of the group, Vanessa Bremer, director of youth and family ministry at the church, created a Facebook page, so anyone, anywhere can join.

"W.R.A.K.," Bremer explains, "is a flower that sprouted from two church outreach programs: ARK Almighty and Pay It Forward."

She started W.R.A.K. this past fall to provide opportunities to practice kindness, develop faith and create Christian fellowship and community.

Each week, local participants meet at the coffee shop to pick up a new challenge and share their W.R.A.K. stories. Those of us who are at a distance get the challenges on Facebook or by email.

Each new challenge and correlating Bible verse is increasingly more involved, both spiritually and personally. Participants are not required to finish a challenge before delving into the next one.

"Some are easier to complete than others," Bremer admits.

MyStory YourStory



Paula Damon
Columnist

One challenge was based on Proverbs 11:25 "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." We were to make an effort to allow others to go first through the door, in conversation, while waiting in line and so on.

Another was to treat others when we were treating ourselves. We were to buy an extra coffee, candy bar, apple or soda and offer it to someone else. This one was rooted in Hebrews 13:16, which states "And do not forget to do good and to share with others..."

What surprised me the most about W.R.A.K. is that the weekly tasks are becoming more natural and routine in my daily life.

W.R.A.K. now has more than 75 participants from across the U.S. and continues to grow each week.

If you want to "W.R.A.K." up some random acts of kindness, become a friend on Facebook or email Bremer at vanessafelcyouth@yahoo.com to start receiving the weekly challenges by email.

For more information, contact Vanessa Bremer 402.873.5424.

Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women Communications Contests. In the 2009 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contest, Paula's columns took three first-place awards. To contact Paula, email pauladamon@iunet.net, follow her blog at www.my-story-your-story.blogspot.com and find her on Facebook.

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■ Please limit letters to 350 words or less. Letters should deal with a single subject, be of general interest and state a specific point of view. Letters are edited with brevity, clarity and newspaper style in mind.

■ In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the Plain Talk will accept no letters attacking private individuals or businesses.

■ Specific individuals or entities addressed in letters may be given the opportunity to read the letter prior to publication and be allowed to answer the letter in the same issue.

Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted. Please mail to: Letters, P.O. Box 357, Vermillion, SD 57069, or e-mail us at david.lias@plaintalk.net.

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