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Housing program at risk after budget cuts

By **Travis Gulbrandson**

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The Vermillion Housing Authority (VHA) has taken another hit with the latest round of federal budget cuts.

All told, VHA will see 32 percent cut in administration costs, a continuation of cutting it has seen over the past few years.

Last year's administrative budget was \$72,965, which means this year's budget will be approximately \$49,617 after the decrease in funding.

"That's a dramatic cut," said David Thiesse, executive director of VHA. "In 2006, our admin was \$95,000, so in four years, we've basically gone in half."

The program - which provides rental assistance through the Section 8 Housing Choice Program - is federally funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

"The feds give us X amount of dollars a month to provide rental assistance to families, so we administer those funds," explained Steve Howe, president of the VHA board. "Right now the feds give us enough money to serve 200 families, and we have 150 on the waiting list. So you're talking about more than 350 families in a town of Vermillion's size that are utilizing or need to utilize federal rental assistance, because they just don't earn enough."

Thiesse added, "I started in 2005. We've put \$4.5 million into the community to landlords, and we've assisted just under 11,000 families in those five years. That's pretty much the population."

The program does not include students or people under 24 years of age who are without dependents, Howe said.

"We've eliminated the students. They have other housing options," he said.

Although a 32 percent cut is large, it actually is lower than the budget under which VHA will find itself operating.

"We've been operating on a continuing resolution since the first of the year, and basically now that they've got the budget set for 2011, the money that they did pay us in the first few months was more than they should have, according to the new budget. So, they're cutting us back more," Thiesse said.

In the past, VHA has been able to find additional sources of funding.

"The city has given us some

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USD commencement



In his keynote address at USD's commencement Saturday, Lt. Gov. Matt Michels urged graduates and their friends and family to devote themselves to public service. "Public service is a high calling that is grounded more in personal values than market values. It involves looking out for the collective interests of all rather than the narrow interests of the few," he said.

(Photo by David Lias)

Michels to USD grads: Accept call of public service

By **David Lias**

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Lt. Gov. Matt Michels told graduates of the 124th spring commencement at the University of South Dakota Saturday that his desire was "to inspire all of you - you who are graduates, you who are here visiting and celebrating - to serve others."

Michels did so not just by citing the opinions of historical figures, ranging from Abraham Lincoln to USD's esteemed W.O. Farber.

He also threw in a deeply personal story in his keynote address to graduates, a speech, given on the eve of Mother's Day, about the matriarch in his family, and how with the help of the Vermillion community, she kept Michels' home life from unraveling.

"Due to financial difficulties in my family's business, my father decided to leave the state in search of opportunities," he told the graduates and the capacity crowd that had gathered in the USD DakotaDome to witness Saturday morning's commencement. "The plan was that my mother and the four of us left at home - I was the oldest of the children - would eventually join him."

"She worked hard, kept everything together, but she always admonished that if we worked hard, and took advantage of educational opportunities, we would succeed, but only if you also helped others. She was of course right."

LT. GOVERNOR MATT MICHELS

A few months later, Michels said, his mother, while crying, told him and his siblings that his father had called and said he wasn't coming back.

"In addition to the obvious emotional devastation, we financially cratered. We searched around and found a great amount of undiscovered debt, and we didn't have enough income," he said. "There were mouths to feed, heating bills to pay. My mother was well recognized as a special ed instructor. What were we going to do?"

"Guess what? The community rallied around us," Michels said. "So many, many people - it would take hours to recall their names and their gifts."

Michels is especially grateful to Jack DeVany, a Vermillion attorney and family friend. "He always

listened, he always served, and always comforted us. He never charged us a dime," he said.

Michels describes his mother as a hero. "She worked hard, kept everything together, but she always admonished that if we worked hard, and took advantage of educational opportunities, we would succeed," he said, "but only if you also helped others. She was of course right."

His mother, Michels said, "made me who I am today."

Michels was born in Pierre, grew up in Vermillion and was elected South Dakota's 38th lieutenant governor last November. He has a long-

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A SUMMER SCENE



It's beginning to look a lot like summer on the campus of the University of South Dakota, with the sun high overhead, the flowers in bloom and the sidewalks virtually empty. Classes dismissed last week, with commencement taking place last Saturday.

(Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)

Diverse job market key to fighting poverty

By **Travis Gulbrandson**

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According to recent census data, Clay County has a poverty rate of 23 percent.

For this to change, Vermillion has to diversify its industry mix, said Steve Howe, director of the Vermillion Area Chamber of Commerce & Development Company.

"Being a single-industry community is not working real well for us if you look at our numbers," Howe said. "Three hundred fifty (families) needing housing assistance, 22 percent in poverty, 70 percent of the workforce in organizations like Masaba (are) coming from outside. Those aren't rosy numbers for Vermillion to grow."

The poverty level is "not necessarily" an issue resulting from Vermillion's high student population, Howe said.



HOWE

has to do with the fact that we're a single-industry town."

Howe said that the poverty levels of other South Dakota cities that serve as locations for state-run institutions are either at or below the average of 14-15 percent.

"If the presence of a university was the primary reason for our poverty rates to be high, that would be the case with the other state institution

"That's an argument that I get often, that it's because we're a college town," he said. "Well, it is because we're a college town, but it has nothing to do with the students. It

communities. And it's not," he said. "The reason ours are higher is because of the lack of industry diversity."

"If you're not working at the university, for the most part you're working for the retail and service industries that ultimately serve the university," he said. "Those are the career paths that pay very little. They pay in that poverty range."

The leading employers in the city are the University of South Dakota, followed by Stream Global Services and Sanford Hospital. Masaba and Polaris are big employers, as well.

However, many of these institutions' employees come from out of town, Howe said.

"We haven't traditionally developed these (businesses) ... and now that we are starting to get some of those businesses, we are dependent upon outside labor in order to serve

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