

Farmington Observer

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Our fundamental purposes are to enhance the lives of our readers, nurture the hometowns we serve and contribute to the business success of our customers.

Kevin's Law would help fix a failed system

Kevin Heisinger, a 24-year-old graduate student at the University of Michigan, and Kendra Webdale, a 32-year-old New York woman, share a tragic and triumphant connection.

Both died at the hands of mentally ill adults who had refused treatment, and their deaths have spawned legislation designed to protect others. Kendra's Law passed in New York two years ago; Kevin's Law was proposed last week by a bi-partisan team of Michigan lawmakers, including Rep. Andrew Raczowski (R-Farmington Hills).

The law would allow families, caregivers and mental health professionals to intervene and secure needed treatment for people with mental illness, before they become a danger to themselves or others. Under current law, intervention is only allowed when an actual danger exists — such as when someone has already done bodily harm, either to themselves or others.

When it is too late, Michigan courts could order intensive outpatient mental health care for up to 180 days, renewable for up to a year.

Raczowski, Rep. Tom George (R-Portage) and Rep. Virg Bernero (D-Lansing) may have some opposition — although New York's law has withstood court challenges. Citizens and organizations opposed to involuntary commitment believe it to be a violation of civil rights and an end-run around the judicial process.

We disagree. Kevin's Law and Kendra's Law apply to a small percentage of people who are either in great need of help or who pose the greatest risk to the public. A great many people live and work successfully and safely while being treated for mental illness. Kevin's Law would give Michigan's "reformed" mental health system a failing. In June of this year, a group of advocates for people with mental illness published a scathing "report card" they say indicates the state doesn't have enough facilities to provide long-term psychiatric care for the number of people who need it.

According to Mental Health Association in Michigan, the Alliance for the

Mentally Ill of Michigan, the Association for Children's Mental Health, Michigan Association for Children with Emotional Disorders and the Michigan Psychiatric Society, the number of people with mental illnesses who end up in the criminal justice system has reached "epidemic" proportions.

While they blame Gov. John Engler's mental health reforms over the past 10 years, his spokespersons have criticized the report as the biased production of noted Engler critics. As is almost always the case, the truth lies somewhere in between.

Years ago, mental health advocates pushed to close large psychiatric hospitals, which were considered stigmatizing

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warehouses that didn't provide adequate care. Unfortunately, the move toward a more community-based mental health system simply shoved many people with serious mental illnesses out of hospitals and onto the streets.

You can't just turn violent people in need of long-term psychiatric care out into the world and expect them to slide easily into society. Without intensive (and thus expensive) daily supervision, these folks are a danger to themselves and others.

The system's failure is everyone's fault; now everyone must work together to fix it. Kevin's Law is an important, bi-partisan step in that direction.

We urge Raczowski's constituents to contact him or the Governor's office to express their support for Kevin's Law. It will go a long way toward reducing public risk of getting help to people who need it most desperately, people trapped by a system failing so badly, it has proven deadly.

Universities should keep education affordable

While politicians at the state and federal level have spent the past year focusing on K-12 school reforms, another education concern has quietly reared its ugly head for the first time in years — rising tuition at public colleges and universities across the state. For Michigan students and their families, the promise that state universities offer an affordable path to higher education is apparently going the way of the compact car.

Stunning tuition increases unveiled by the state's 15 public universities this summer are enough to put a chill in any checkbook. They average 10.7 percent and range from 6.6 percent at the University of Michigan (\$7,378 for 2001-2002) to 18.4 percent at Eastern Michigan University (\$4,601).

That's not just bad news for parents of last June's high school graduates. When quality learning opportunities move out of reach for middle class families, we all suffer. The brain drain that occurs when hometown talent is shut out — or forced to turn elsewhere — for college creates long-term negative consequences for the state's economy, technological edge and quality of life.

We understand the current economic climate is shaky and the budget is tight. Nonetheless, the Observer urges state legislators to make finding relief for in-state university students a priority when it reconvenes this fall. The issue also needs to be addressed seriously in next year's gubernatorial campaign. (We're encouraged to see a few of the leading "undeclared" candidates are already speaking out.)

Neither are we unsympathetic to the reasons university officials cite for dramatic tuition increases, primarily cuts in state funding and the burden the tuition tax credit has imposed on schools as they deal with their own rising costs. (The credit, introduced in the early 1990s after similar tuition hikes, is available to stu-

dents attending schools where increases are kept in line with inflation.)

Donald Nugent, an MSU trustee who voted for the 8.9 percent increase there, told the Associated Press it was the only way to make up for the decrease in state

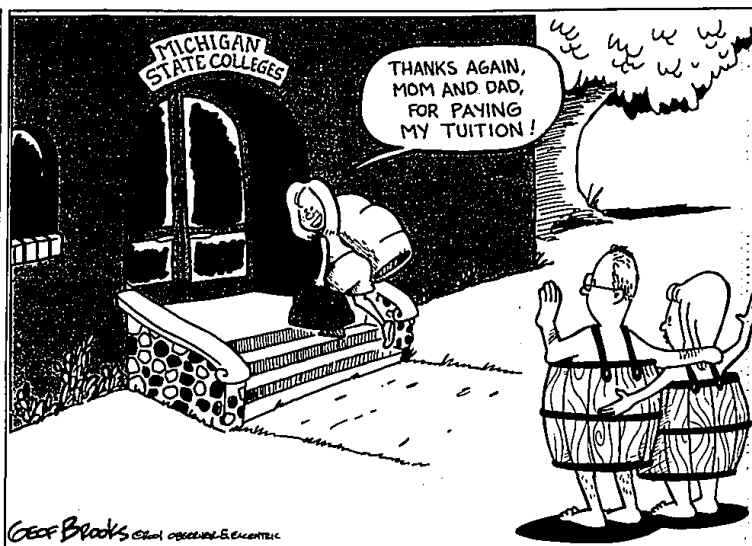
We strongly believe the highest priority for MSU and other state universities must remain providing affordable opportunities for Michigan residents from the broadest possible background.

funding and continue to boost university salaries, which he said lag behind most Big Ten schools. Trustee Dorothy Gonzales opposed the increase and said MSU needed to focus more on cutting costs. "We really need to take a good look at what is there and what we could do without," she said. "We need to look at everything from A to Z."

That may be. But we strongly believe the highest priority for MSU and other state universities must remain providing affordable opportunities for Michigan residents from the broadest possible background.

This educating-our-own philosophy is not a new idea. In fact, it was a founding principle at most of Michigan's public universities — from the land-grant status and agricultural bent at Michigan State University, to the teacher's college goal of EMU and Wayne State Univ's early opportunities for urban students. It's the reason why schools offer lower tuition for in-state students than those coming from outside Michigan.

It's a mission worthy of pursuit and one that university officials and state elected leaders need to move to the front burner.



LETTERS

■ 11 Pines a waste

The Farmington Hills City Council did not sign an agreement with the developer on Monday evening.

I attended that meeting, and my impression of it was that more discussion was what they all agreed upon. I was quoted accurately as opposing a \$1-million-per-hole golf course. The least-important reason is that I am not a golfer. I believe that this huge project is a work of self-indulgence and willful disregard for the environment.

It represents nothing less than making a \$10 million giveaway to the golfing community. Where are all these funds coming from? You guessed it — from the taxpayers. A few million here and a few million there is how they all so complacently discussed the disposal of the taxpayers' money.

Councilman Ellis said that he was only responding to the community when we, the taxpayers, voted for the parks and recreation millage. My response to Mr. Ellis was, that there has been a drastic change in public perception of the need for more golf courses. The issues now involve quality of life and sustainability.

This golf course will require poisonous chemicals and the waste of our precious water resources to keep it green. The streams and rivers of the watershed of the Rouge River will suffer the consequences. As beneficiaries of those water resources, we will also suffer.

The finiteness of this Earth is apparently not a concern to this council. They have overstepped the bounds of their mandate. As a citizen, it is appalling that I must face a city council unanimously in favor of this outrageous scheme.

No environmental impact study has even been mentioned. It is as though this Earth is a playground instead of a profoundly disturbed ecological system. The question then becomes how to stop this proposal dead in its tracks. The public meetings have not even been held and yet the council is talking of bringing in the trucks.

This is the time, if ever there was one, to act as role models for the responsible stewardship of the Earth. We owe it to our children and to the future.

Mary M. Johnston
Farmington Hills

■ Striking a nerve

I seem to have struck a nerve within the community with my comments on Nancy Bates' pet project — the Nancy Bates Center — otherwise known as the city sponsored baby-sitting service, run by Todd Lipsa.

Initially, let us list the facts that we are relatively certain of as presented to us by our local government. (The term "relatively certain" is used since "absolutely certain" can never be used in the same sentence with the word "government.")

The program was initially funded by grants from the state of Michigan and is run by Todd Lipsa. In the 10 years I served this city, I don't recall ever having anything less than cordial and respectful conversations with Todd Lipsa. Until he proves otherwise, I will be a member of the Todd Lipsa fan club.

As far as I am aware, there has never been an unbiased independent financial audit performed on the Youth Program. We don't know:

1. How many people actually use the

program.
2. What sets the program priorities.
3. What the money is spent on.
4. Who budgets the money.
5. Does the program run a deficit — if so, where is the additional funding generated.

6. Does the program run on a surplus — if so, where does the surplus go.

It appears the grant-money pipeline has run its course and the citizens of Farmington Hills will be asked to fund this program through taxation. For another tax to pass, it is in Todd Lipsa's and the city's best interest to account for the hundreds of thousands of dollars that have been used by this program in the last few years. They are going to have to sell the fact, especially to the fixed-income seniors (which I am not) that the numerous extracurricular after-school programs are failing and the current school tax is not being utilized to its fullest.

The Farmington Board of Education I received recently lists 40 developmental assets defined by the Search Institute. No. 1 is family support. No. 2 is positive family communication. No. 6 is caring school climate. No. 8 parent involvement in schooling.

It seems to me the observation I made in my last letter remains steadfast. If you don't want your children home unsupervised, or out walking the streets, our society suggests that parental time must include both quality and quantity, especially starting at 2:17 p.m.

George Sarkisian
Farmington Hills

■ Prompted to write

I always read with interest your opinion page and find it both interesting and at times irritating as I'm sure most people do. The response letter from Mr. Sarkisian prompted me to finally write. His issue with the city's youth program is particularly annoying. I find the program invaluable to parents such as myself. I'm sure parents have varied reasons for using the programs.

I would hardly label it a "baby-sitting" service as Mr. Sarkisian put it. When your child reaches this age and is no longer able to attend conventional summer day camps that are offered (which, by the way, are quite costly) what are a parent's options at this point?

Well, I'll tell you. You can leave them home on their own, which means they are either out on the street looking for trouble or locked in the house all day. I can't possibly explain the peace of mind I have knowing my son is in a safe, supervised environment for the day. Todd Lipsa and his staff are kind, caring, dependable people. I really don't think they need a lesson in child-rearing skills. That is one job as parents.

As for your suggestion that you arrange your schedule for the sake of your children (so that one parent could be there for them) would be perfect. However, all of us don't have that option. Being a single parent, I have come to depend on the youth program to provide my son with a place to go both after school and in the summer. I can't imagine him going home after school every day to an empty house for as much as three hours until I get home.

I consider myself extremely fortunate. I'm a resident of a city that offers such a fine program. I hope it contin-

ues to be a viable alternative to parents, and, yes, I hope to send my younger son there as well. We live in a changing world, and I'm glad the city realizes our youth need a place to go and just be themselves.

Lisa Henning
Farmington

■ Bilingual blasted

Very little of importance that may convince the populace that bilingual education is better in the classroom situation than the use of the English language as primary and efficient has been recorded.

Students for decades have been learning with English as the only oral and written vehicle to accomplish learning and understanding. Now we have considerable evidence that the achievement of bilingual education has produced students who score very well on every test they are asked to take.

Some former bilingual proponents now admit that the use of English in the classroom, without any obfuscation with the use of a second language, is better than the bilingual educational program they had earlier advanced.

Still, many liberals insist that it is fairer, more democratic, and preferred to meet the condition of diversity in the classroom.

They still don't get it or don't believe the overwhelming evidence of the results realized using English to communicate in the classroom situation.

Neil Goodbred
Livonia

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We welcome letters to the editor. Please include your full name, address and phone number for verification. We may edit for clarity, space and content.

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