

Opinion

The Battalion

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A healthy solution

Texas A&M is to be congratulated for belatedly restoring emergency after-hours medical service at the A.P. Beutel Health Center. But recognition that illness knows no business hours should have come months ago.

The center quit providing the after-hours service in May 1986 because of problems getting on-call physicians to come to the center at night. A University contract now stipulates that a physician and nurse be available for emergency outpatient care, ensuring that A&M students who become ill at night or on weekends can receive treatment on campus.

Health center director Claude Goswick said the 24-hour service will be evaluated this semester to see if its benefits outweigh its costs to the University. But while the cost of the service is high — about \$300,000 per semester — discontinuing it again would be a mistake.

A&M students pay student service fees that fund the health center. They deserve quality treatment — no matter what time they need it — in return.

Legal lifesaver

It may infringe on freedom of choice, and it doesn't do much for personal comfort while traveling, but the Texas mandatory seat belt law has proven to be an effective lifesaver.

In the two years since the Legislature made it illegal to drive in Texas without a seat belt, officials estimate that more than 250 lives were spared. Department of Public Safety figures show 157 fewer deaths during the law's first year alone.

Whether they're doing it to save lives or to avoid penalties, most motorists are taking the law seriously: Figures compiled by the Texas Transportation Institute show about 60 percent of Texas drivers are buckling up.

Beltless motorists stopped by police can be stiffly penalized, but the \$25 to \$50 fines serve as reasonable reminders. Bruised collarbones or chests are preferable to lost lives.

The last two years are ample proof that the seat belt law is legitimate. A simple tug and a quick snap could save you as little as 25 bucks or as much as your life.

Time has come for U.S. 'Literacy Corps'

An idea has been presented to Congress that is worth trying in the battle against illiteracy: to create a Literacy Corps that will enable

college students to volunteer for a few hours a week as assistant teachers for students in nearby public schools or other institutions in return for college credit.

We pride ourselves on being an "advanced nation," but illiteracy in America is at a level no nation should tolerate. Vast numbers of Americans lack the basic reading skills to function in society. According to one estimate, 23 million citizens over the age of 18 cannot read the poison warning on a can of pesticide or a package of cigarettes, the headline of a daily newspaper or a letter from their child's teacher.

An additional 35 million are semi-literate, reading so poorly that they barely function at a survival level. That makes 58 million adults, roughly a third of the nation's population over 18, whom our system of education failed in their adolescent years, and who are functionally illiterate today.

The result is a massive problem of illiteracy that costs the nation heavily in welfare and unemployment, industrial accidents and lost productivity.

Illiteracy is also a threat to our constitutional system: How can a functional illiterate really understand that system or defend it effectively?

A recent study complained that America has slipped behind Japan in the quality of education, but the truth is, we have slipped behind 47 other countries, too. America ranks 49th in literacy among the 159 countries of the world.

So far, we have not addressed the problem very effectively. The federal government spends billions of dollars

Warren E. Burger
and
Edward M. Kennedy
Guest Columnists

every year on education, but only a pittance is targeted at illiteracy. In fact, total spending on illiteracy in the United States reaches only about 4 percent of those who need help.

The National Advisory Council on Adult Education estimates that we would need to spend five billion dollars — fifty times more than is allocated today — to have a significant impact on the problem through costly traditional programs.

New spending of that magnitude is out of the question because of the federal deficit. The challenge is to persuade America to do more without spending more. That is a tall order, but it is not impossible — which is where a Literacy Corps would come in.

Pilot projects at the University of Miami and St. John's University in New York City, relying so far on corporate donations, have made a start that provides a pattern. The results of these modest efforts are so compelling that the time has come for a national effort.

Legislation pending in Congress seeks \$27 million over the next two years to launch Literacy Corps projects at approximately a thousand colleges and universities across the country. The bill will provide start-up grants of about \$25,000 per college to cover the initial administrative costs of campus programs.

Participating college students would sign up for electives offered by their colleges and taught by their professors in semester-long courses comparable to those in "clinical legal education" at many law schools, although the focus of the Literacy Corps would be very different. As part of the course, college students would be given instruction on how to tutor in reading.

In addition to teaching in local elementary and high schools, Literacy Corps participants could also tutor in Head Start centers, institutions for the

disabled, adult continuing education programs, jails or other facilities where supervised classroom settings are available.

In a typical ten-week semester, each college student in the program would provide 60 hours of tutoring. If a thousand colleges participated, 100,000 or more students might join the Literacy Corps, and a very large amount of tutoring could be generated over the next two years.

In addition to tackling the problem of illiteracy, a Literacy Corps has another benefit — harnessing the idealism and volunteerism and commitment of young Americans. So far, initiatives in this area have been stymied by the high price of conventional proposals such as a National Service Corps or ROTC-type scholarships or loan-forgiveness programs for students willing to commit themselves to a period of post-graduate public service.

We believe a Literacy Corps has all the potential for today that President Kennedy's Peace Corps had in the 1960s. Young Americans in this generation are ready, willing and eager to respond to the challenge of public service as their parents were a generation ago, when President

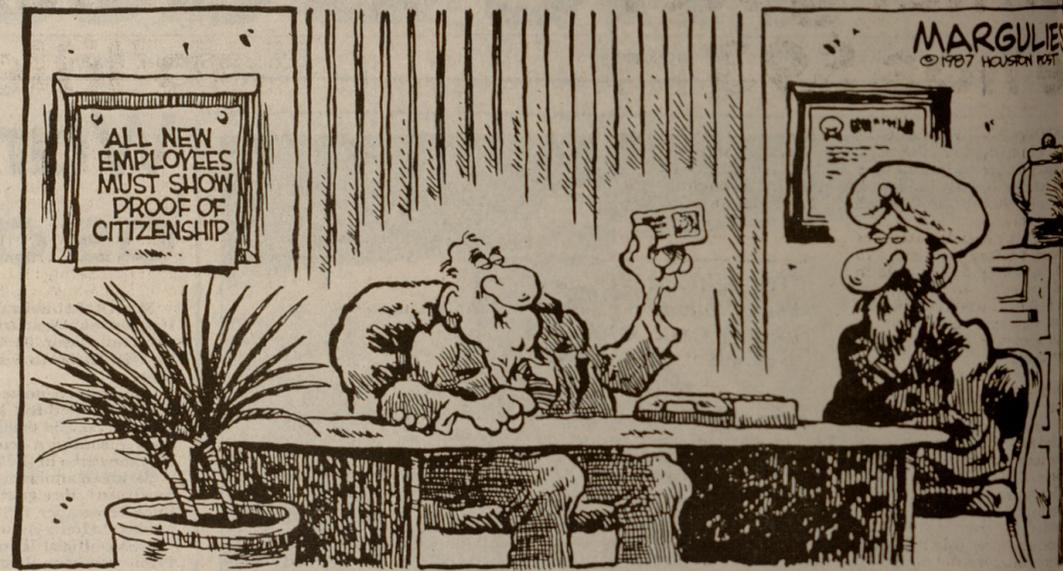
Kennedy urged them to "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

If colleges and universities across the country respond by accepting the Literacy Corps as part of their educational process, students will have the opportunity to participate by many thousands and America may at last begin to deal in more effective and affordable ways with the shameful and festering problem of illiteracy in our midst.

One final point — the Literacy Corps is not a new idea. It is based on a model conceived in 1969 by an unusually creative private citizen, Norman Manasa of Washington, D.C., who has been knocking on many doors for the better part of a decade seeking support for the concept.

And the Literacy Corps is an idea whose time is overdue.

Warren E. Burger was Chief Justice of the United States from 1969 to 1986; he is currently chairman of the Commission on the United States Constitution. Edward M. Kennedy is the senior Democratic senator from Massachusetts.



Prisoners' rights taking place of justice for all in Texas

I've finally determined a reasonable synonym for the Texas prison system. I want to rename it a travesty because it is one.



D.A. Jensen

The Texas prison system is one of the most blatant examples of injustice in our just country. Justice, in the legal sense, has come to mean justice for the criminal and not for the victim, the public, or those charged with upholding order in the prison system.

The problems facing the system are immense: overcrowding, disease and brutality. But the real question comes down to exactly who suffers because of the problems. The problems make the inmates suffer, but their solutions make the public suffer. The public suffers because inmate rights must be upheld at

all costs, even at the cost of the public's rights.

Texas prisons are overcrowded. There just isn't enough room for every criminal in the system. The solution to overcrowding has been twofold.

First, close the prison doors. Simply do not allow the admission of new inmates. It doesn't matter that there is no place else to put them. Overcrowding makes living conditions in prison inhumane.

I know law-abiding citizens in Brazos County who live in overcrowded, broken-down houses. Some are living with three families in a two-room house. Who is watching out for humanity here?

The second solution to overcrowding is to release inmates who are eligible for parole earlier than their original parole date. The penalty for breaking the law is reduced. The pain to the crime victim is never reduced. The pain to society is never reduced. But this is justice.

There is no sex in prison. That is the

rule. Sex is not allowed, but it does place. This has led to one of the most recent problems of the state prison: AIDS is being spread between inmates engaging in illicit sex.

The solution to prevent the spread of AIDS seems reasonable. The New York prison system decided to distribute condoms among its inmates. It encourages their use. I wouldn't be surprised if Texas adopted similar policy. It is reasonable to protect the inmates from a disease they should have exposure to in the first place.

By providing protection from AIDS the system is taking away a powerful deterrent for breaking the no-sex rule. It is unfortunate that this is the only way to also protect the public from a probable epidemic of the disease.

There is a lot of controversy about AIDS testing in prison. It is, some say, a violation of the prisoner's right to privacy. It is also the only way to protect those working in the prison and those incarcerated in the prison from possible infection.

The current policy in Texas allows inmates who are known AIDS carriers to be identified as carrying an infectious disease. The prison staff is not told if an inmate is carrying the AIDS virus.

Recently an inmate threw urine on a guard in an attempt to infect the guard with the virus. The guard was unaware the inmate was carrying AIDS until after the incident. The guard was not allowed the freedom to decide if he wanted to expose himself to the risk associated with dealing with an AIDS-carrying inmate because the inmate's privacy was being protected. This is justice.

Honest justice will occur when guards are provided with the information necessary to enable them to do their job effectively while at the same time protecting themselves from possible infection with a deadly disease.

Honest justice will occur when the victim's rights are respected just as much as the criminal's rights.

It will occur when law-abiding citizens are as well-cared-for as state prison inmates.

The criminal rapes the public. The public's sense of justice rapes the public a second time.

It is time for the type of reform that makes the prisoner a contributor to society labor while he is incarcerated.

D.A. Jensen is a senior journalist and a columnist for The Battalion.

by Berke Breathed

BLOOM COUNTY

