

OPINION

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OTHER VIEW | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Recession: The gift that keeps on taking

The respectfully nicknamed Great Recession officially ended in June 2009, and the wounds from that economic collapse have been slow to heal. Yet even a robust recovery, as the nation experienced after the double-dip recessions of the early 1980s, would have helped only so much. Inevitably, human pain lingers.

Using decades of Social Security records, academic researchers have shown that workers who lose their jobs in mass layoffs suffer deep, persistent losses in their incomes and living standards. Losing a job nearly always hurts (we'll make allowances for people who were planning to quit). But it hurts much more to lose a job during hard times, such as 1980-82, or 2007-09.

Even in relative good times, laid-off workers take a huge financial hit as a result of their involuntary job losses. In a recent study, scholars at the University of Chicago and Columbia University found that men ages 50 and under who were laid off when the nation's unemployment rate stood below 6 percent could expect to lose the equivalent of 1.4 years of income over the rest of their working lives. That's money they otherwise could have expected to earn had they been able to continue on their former career trajectories, before layoffs forced them to take jobs that paid less.

And when the unemployment rate exceeds 8 percent, as it did from early 2009 until this September, those thrown out of work lose a staggering 2.8 years of income over the rest of their working lives.

These insights help explain why demand is unusually high — three years after the Great Recession formally ended — for emergency food and shelter.

Across the U.S., the number of homeless and hungry people is growing, according to a recent survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

All of us have heard story after story about how families long rooted in the middle class have found themselves without a roof over their heads. More than half of the cities, including Chicago, reported that homelessness had increased. Requests for emergency food

assistance rose from the previous year in 21 of the 25 cities surveyed, again including Chicago.

Food pantries in almost every city surveyed have had to cut the amount of food they distribute to each person. That's a practical effect of rising demand and reduced supplies, partly as a result of higher food prices. Food pantries put less in each bag of groceries they give away, and cap the number of monthly visits they allow each family. Soup kitchens cut the size of the meals they serve.

Each of us can step up to offer at least some help, even in — especially in — a season when charity appeals have to compete with hefty credit card bills and daunting holiday expenses. The need is real. Yes, Americans have been hearing about the growing need all around them for years now. It is tempting to give in to recession fatigue, more difficult to acknowledge that homelessness and hunger don't take winter vacations.

As a nation of individuals, we Americans can do better — and we shouldn't be relying on our local, state and federal governments to meet every human need. Opening presents was enjoyable, but it didn't signal that the need for giving has passed. At this time of year, in this economy, the persistence of homelessness and hunger testify that needs abound.

Given the suffering that continues as this recovery limps along, it was maddening to see President Barack Obama and a divided Congress head off for their holiday breaks with no deal in place to avert the "fiscal cliff" — some \$500 billion of 2013 spending cuts and tax increases slated to take effect Tuesday.

That ongoing failure to negotiate a settlement risks just what millions of Americans fear: a new recession while they're still struggling to escape the effects of the last.

At the rate our elected politicians in Washington are going, the U.S. may ring in the new year with tax hikes on every working American, and the serious threat that joblessness again will spike.

Mr. President, members of Congress, get to work.

First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

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COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

Year's end, and beginning

It's hard to believe that the final days of my first two-year term as this region's state senator have come and gone with the New Year. But they have. So I can't think of a better way to ring in 2013 and the beginning of my second term than by recalling some of the thoughts I shared back in January 2011 when I first took office in the Senate. I'll start with this one: The economic and fiscal challenges may be as daunting as they've ever been in New York State, but there has never been a more important time to serve.

When I took the oath of office in the Senate chamber on Jan. 5, 2011, it offered a real opportunity to get to work on the ground floor of turning this state around. Nearly two years ago, the common thinking was that the ability of a new governor and a new Legislature to take dramatic steps to truly chart a new course for New York would ultimately be the barometer of our success. Would we finally begin to right the ship? Would we finally take advantage of the opportunity for a fresh start in New York? Looking back over the past two years, the answer's been yes on both counts. We've started to right the ship and we're under way with a fresh start. So when I reflect on my first term in the Senate, I keep recalling that time-honored idea that "out of adversity comes opportunity."

This same thought's going to hold true in 2013, even more so. The fact of life in New York government today is that we're going to have to keep



TOM O'MARA

reassessing the impact of Hurricane Sandy and respond accordingly. In fact, it's going to dominate the key decisions of the 2013 legislative session that gets under way in early January. Governor Andrew Cuomo has already signaled the enormity of the agenda. In mid-November, he formed three state commissions to undertake a total review and make specific recommendations to "overhaul and improve" New York's emergency response capabilities. They're charged with re-envisioning the state's systems of communications, energy, environmental protection, transportation and others to better withstand future severe weather events. You can read more about each of these commissions, and we all should, on www.governor.ny.gov.

It's a huge undertaking. While the images of Hurricane Sandy's destruction have been powerfully clear, developing a better picture of the economic and fiscal toll for the state, for New York City and Long Island, and ultimately for localities statewide will be ongoing. So much hinges on federal assistance. But it's clear that all of the challenges we face — upstate and downstate — have become more difficult in post-Sandy New York.

So I'll wrap up this first term in the same way I

began it, by saying that I'm enormously honored to represent all of you. I'm looking forward to the opportunities we'll have to keep working together to improve the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions. The emphasis remains on together. Our communities are most effective when we join forces. I'll keep doing my best to provide as many of these opportunities as possible because I believe, above all else, that a return to the fundamentals of good government is needed more than ever. It's a list that always begins with open, straightforward give-and-take between elected officials and those they represent.

Priority No. 1 will be to carry on the tradition of accessibility and teamwork that's long proven effective in representing the communities of this region. I'll be working closely with all of our local Assembly representatives, as well as with the local leaders whose efforts are central to the quality of our counties, towns and villages.

Over the past several years of economic struggle, New York and states across the nation have been forced to make decisions that have been painful across the board. That's been especially true in areas like education. In 2013, we have to continue our efforts to put in place a more equitable and fair distribution of state education aid to low-wealth, high-needs school districts, particularly rural upstate and small city school districts. My sense is that we've never faced choices like we're going to face in post-Sandy New York. Legislators

statewide will be asking what it means for the future of education aid, but also for other priority issues including mandate relief and economic development (with a particular emphasis on small business and manufacturing).

Education aid, mandate relief and economic development are just a few of the priority issues that we'll be watching for next week when the governor begins putting his agenda before every legislator and all New Yorkers during his Jan. 9, 2013 State of the State message. In my view, it's going to be the most important and maybe the most difficult State of the State of our time.

My Senate service will stay focused on fundamental principles: Accessibility to constituents. Responsibility to taxpayers. Economic and fiscal soundness. I'll keep doing everything possible to build on this bedrock of government service, and I'm grateful for the opportunity. In 2013, it's safe to say we're going to be called upon for all of the empathy, cooperation, balance, perseverance, patience and common sense imaginable. Bottom line: The stakes will be enormous.

Throughout the New Year, keep in mind my website (omara.nysenate.gov) as a steady source of legislative news and other information, as well as my email address (omara@nysenate.gov) to keep sharing your thoughts, opinions and suggestions for better government.

Tom O'Mara is a Republican state senator from Big Flats.

ANOTHER VIEW

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COMMENTARY | FRED MCKISSACK JR.

GOP has no answers to shootings

Conservatives have been at a loss in responding to the murders at Sandy Hook Elementary. Their answer, for the most part, has been that public schools need guns and God. But neither would create a safe environment for our school children.

As the father of a boy who is a year or two older than those children murdered at Sandy Hook, I can't understand how the National Rifle Association and various legislators could claim that having an armed guard in every school — or even arming the teachers — would ensure our kids' safety.

After all, the high school in Columbine had an armed guard who was on duty that day, and he wasn't able to stop Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold from killing 12 students and one teacher.

And outfitted as Adam Lanza was with a semi-automatic rifle, he could have killed any armed guard who was at Sandy Hook. What's more, an armed guard faced with a suspicious person entering the school grounds would have only a split second to decide whether to shoot first or not, and that situation is a recipe for killing innocent people.

As for God in the

classroom, I'll preface this by saying that I am an Episcopalian and try to lead my life in a Christian ethos of love and commitment to my fellow humans regardless of tradition or philosophy. Would prayer and Bible study have changed the minds of those with murderous rage from killing people in schools and theaters? Of course not. However, as I was brought to tears reading how teachers shielded children with their bodies, I saw a living reminder of what is means to truly love and be committed to the least of us. The acts by these teachers bespeak the best assets that dwell in all

of us.

But using the tragedy at Sandy Hook to try to knock a hole in the wall between church and state is crass and exploitative.

Neither more guns nor more God in the classroom is an answer to Sandy Hook and other rampages.

Instead, we need sensible gun-control laws. Meanwhile, conservatives will continue to lose ground if they insist on peddling solutions that won't get the job done and that seem so self-serving.

Fred McKissack Jr. of Fort Wayne, Ind., is a writer for Progressive Media Project.