

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

Honor low-wage workers with respect

The worker at the drive-through window of the fast-food restaurant was giving a virtuoso performance.

She heartily greeted the occupants of every vehicle. She took their orders patiently and courteously, making suggestions when appropriate.

She pushed the daily promotion. “Have you heard about our special offer? No? Well. ...”

Turning her head for a moment, she saw me watching her from inside the restaurant and flashed me a broad grin.

I found myself wishing I was an executive of some sort. I wanted to hop in the car, drive up to the window and offer that woman a job that paid more than a fast-food joint salary. She brought dignity and value to her work.

This is the weekend to acknowledge and honor workers, and at first blush it’s an easy task. Most of us appreciate our child’s bus driver, the clerk at the grocery store who points us to the right aisle when we’re in a hurry and the repairman who arrives on short notice when the air conditioner conks out.

But America’s relationship with workers, especially low-wage earners, is more complicated. We expect and appreciate good service from them, but our political discourse is rife with resentment at having to provide services to make their lives easier.

Newt Gingrich, during his unsuccessful campaign this year to be the Republican nominee for president, called Barack Obama “the food stamp president,” and said Obama “will always prefer a food stamp economy to a paycheck economy and call it fair.” But it’s not an either-or proposition. Four of 10 food stamp recipients live in a household where someone works and many more are actively seeking jobs.

Just listen to the health care debate, and the resistance in many states to expanding the income limits at which an adult can qualify for Medicaid.

This change would greatly help low-wage earners, who are unlikely to receive decent health benefits from their jobs and who certainly can’t afford to purchase insurance.

Bringing them under the Medicaid umbrella makes

a world of sense, yet lawmakers in many states don’t want to do it. And it’s not just because they’re worried about the expanded limits being expensive, even though the federal government would pick up most of the costs.

Missouri had this very debate a few years ago, when the state’s hospitals actually offered to pay the state to put more adults on Medicaid. Republican lawmakers derided the state’s working poor as lazy and shiftless. One legislator referred to them as “plunderers.”

But these are the people who take care of our aging parents, or clean our offices after we leave for the day. And let’s face it, their low wages enable other people to earn more, and to spend less on food and consumer goods. But conservatives diligently stitch a thread of resentment which holds that government is taking “other people’s money” to help low-wage earners get by.

The obvious route around the schism is better wages.

Fortunately, there is more unanimity on this point. A poll this year by the Public Religion Research Institute found that more than two-thirds of Americans favor raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to as much as \$10 an hour. In skeptical Missouri, 76 percent of voters supported a 2006 ballot measure to lift the floor.

Businesses protest, of course, and politicians hedge, warning of workforce reductions. They are wrong. Reputable studies show that reasonable minimum wage increases act as a stimulus, as low-income workers put the extra money right back into the economy.

Sen. Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, has introduced a bill to raise the floor to \$9.80 over three years. Citizens should let elected officials know they support fair wages.

In observance of Labor Day, take a moment to thank those people who do their jobs with dignity and grace, even if they’re not compensated in kind.

They deserve our respect, not just in personal interactions but in public policy as well.

*Barbara Shelly is a columnist for the Kansas City Star.*

ONLY ONLINE | BLOG



Plummer

"I first became aware of Daryl several years ago when he started offering for sale scores and scores of epimediums following expeditions to China and other Asian countries in search of new species. Two years ago at a garden meeting he delivered two talks – one on his plant explorations and the second on his hybridizing work. True Blue is one result of his hybridization."

To read more, visit [http://www.the-leader.com/blogs/wild\\_bill](http://www.the-leader.com/blogs/wild_bill).

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POLITICS | SEN. TOM O'MARA

Labor Day, back to school and technology



TOM O'MARA

Two sure signs that yet another summer has slipped by arrive this week with our annual Labor Day observance and when students locally and all across New York start heading back to school. But these two events have more in common than just marking the end of summer because whether we’re talking about today’s workforce or education in the 21st century, the discussion sooner or later gets around to the overriding importance of technology.

When we talk about how best to create more jobs for more workers, the discussion inevitably turns to today’s “digital economy.” Same goes for education, where “digital classrooms” have become fundamental to the success of our students. Which makes it somewhat hard to believe that, according to the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources (LCRR) and others, it’s estimated that at least 750,000 rural New Yorkers do not have broadband (high-speed Internet) service. In May 2011, a state-sponsored study concluded that another six million state residents still face significant obstacles, including affordability, to broadband connectivity.

So despite its fundamental importance, the so-called “digital divide” remains a serious challenge for New York State. It embodies the fundamental goal of simply fostering good citizenship, yet closing this troubling divide and providing New York

recommendations for achieving universal broadband service. Each of our regional economic development councils, those representing the

Southern Tier and the Finger Lakes regions, has highlighted the importance of broadband development.

And there was some exciting news on this front out of Albany just recently when New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the start of the application process for the distribution of \$25 million through the “Connect NY” program to promote and expand broadband Internet access in unserved and underserved rural upstate and urban areas. Connect NY represents the “single-largest direct investment of state funding into expanding broadband access in the United States,” according to the governor’s office.

“This investment in high-speed Internet access will ensure that the information superhighway will be open to all New York businesses,” Governor Cuomo said. “By expanding the availability of high-quality broadband services, Connect NY makes our state a national leader in the digital economy and gives our businesses the tools they need to compete and prosper in the global economy.”

The grants are being awarded regionally to Internet service companies and in partnership with local governments and economic development organizations. Connect NY broadband applications will be accepted through

with a broadband and telecommunications infrastructure that’s second to none remains a primary economic and educational goal as well.

Nearly two years ago, the New York State Broadband Development and Deployment Council ([www.nysbroadband.ny.gov](http://www.nysbroadband.ny.gov)) set forth the following mission: “...while the promise of broadband is great, the reality has yet to meet the promise in New York State. Broadband has not fully arrived for all New Yorkers ... To help New York remain competitive on a national and global scale, proactive executive leadership, strong policy mandates, and clear broadband guidelines will ensure broadband networks are widely deployed, affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers.”

There are bright spots. Early last year, the Southern Tier Central Regional Planning and Development Board (STC), in partnership with a \$10-million investment from Corning Incorporated, put a plan in motion for an optical fiber broadband network across Chemung, Schuyler and Steuben counties. Earlier this year in Ithaca, the Tompkins County Broadband Committee issued

October 5, 2012. The application can be found at <http://www.nysbroadband.ny.gov/ConnectNY2012>. Applications are also available through the regional economic development councils and Empire State Development.

For additional details and information, or to request an application, the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council (which encompasses Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Tompkins counties within my legislative district) can be contacted through Empire State Development’s (ESD) regional office in Elmira at 607-426-2999 or by email at [nys-southerntier@esd.ny.gov](mailto:nys-southerntier@esd.ny.gov). The Finger Lakes Regional Council (which includes Yates County in my district) can be reached at ESD’s regional office in Rochester 585-399-7050 or by email at [nys-fingerlakes@esd.ny.gov](mailto:nys-fingerlakes@esd.ny.gov)

As I’ve said before, we’re facing unprecedented short- and long-term economic and fiscal challenges as a state and nation. But there’s an undeniable case being made – and it’s being echoed across every level of government -- that a successful and vibrant future depends on the development of a top-flight broadband infrastructure.

So the beginning of Connect NY, arriving this year at the crossroads of Labor Day and the first day of school, couldn’t be timelier or more welcome.

*Sen. Tom O'Mara is a Republican from Big Flats.*

ANOTHER VIEW



COMMENTARY

Republicans ditch out on the middle class

The American middle class is losing ground fast, and the Republicans are not offering serious help.

A new report by the Pew Research Center reveals the slippage over the last decade. A whopping 85 percent of people surveyed who described themselves as middle class said it is harder than it was a decade ago to maintain their standard of living.

No wonder! In the last decade, median household income decreased from \$73,000 to \$69,500, while net worth dropped 40 percent between 2007 and 2010.

The Republican Party is offering little but rhetorical support to the shrinking middle class. Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan want to extend the Bush tax cuts, which disproportionately go to the wealthy. And the Republican platform vows to do away with the estate tax, even though it already exempts estates under \$5,120,000 from any tax. Meanwhile, the platform knocked out a major middle-class tax break: the home mortgage interest deduction.

These are not the policies the middle class wants. In the Pew study, 58 percent of those polled say the rich need to pay more in taxes. And more than 60 percent believe the Republican Party favors the rich.

The Romney campaign seems to believe that it can mollify the white middle class through color-coded attacks on welfare recipients.

But this diversionary tactic may not work this time, as more Americans of all colors are descending into poverty. Whoever wins in November must address this critical issue – not with rhetoric but with real programs that put people back on their feet.

*David A. Love is a writer for Progressive Media Project, a source of liberal commentary on domestic and international issues; it is affiliated with The Progressive magazine. Readers may write to the author at: Progressive Media Project, 409 East Main Street, Madison, Wis. 53703.*