



PRIVATE SECTOR DOES IT BETTER

Guest Column in the Waco
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A Limited Government LIFT Commentary

After repeated episodes in which state workers have failed to do their job, the case for further outsourcing is stronger than ever.

Private Sector Does It Better

GUEST COLUMN IN THE WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD

BY TOM ALDRED

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BACKGROUND

In his recent commentary criticizing the privatization of some Health and Human Services functions, John Young conceded that "sometimes government is a problem." Mr. Young asserted that "privatizing...can be even worse," pointing to eligibility determination for programs such as Medicaid and Food Stamps as one of those failures. That view is narrow and ignores the repeated failures of state workers to fulfill the most basic obligations to those they are supposed to be serving.

Failures of State Workers

The Houston Chronicle (April 16, 2008) reported that more than 800 state workers have been fired from state school facilities used to care for mentally ill and developmentally disabled since 2004. In 2007 alone, the Department of Family and Protective Services investigated 3,500 allegations of abuse. The Chronicle notes that "about 51 percent of the confirmed incidents involved sexual abuse of residents [and] 31 percent involved physical abuse."

In 2007, juvenile inmates under the care of the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) filed more than 750 complaints of sexual misconduct against TYC officers. The Dallas Morning News (March 6, 2007) reported that complaints—which came from all 13 TYC prisons—alleged offenses ranging from inappropriate flirting and suggestive letters to the rape and sodomy of inmates. It was also reported that "administrators were warned repeatedly of suspicious behavior by two high-ranking staffers, but those warnings were dismissed or covered up."

The trail of neglect reaches back further. In 2004, three children died at the hands of their own parents after Child Protective Services (CPS) had determined that the children could live safely with their families. A review of more than 2,000 CPS cases determined that "case workers ignored agency procedures, took too long to visit suspected abuse victims and closed cases too early."

On May 6, 2008, *The Houston Chronicle* reported that since 2003, 24 Department of Public Safety (DPS) employees in Texas have been charged with fraud after they were "caught taking bribes to sell authentic documents to those who don't qualify."

Union Response

These cases must put an end to the spurious claim made by Young and others that state workers should have the primary guardianship of the most vulnerable individuals. A glance at the Texas Public Employees Union's (TPEU) website reveals a glaringly shameful blind spot on its part. Rather than deploring the abuse and neglect, the latest news item (posted March 28, 2008) is about pay raises: "Texas approves pay raise, signing bonus for prison guards." Apparently, abuse and neglect by state workers is inconsequential so long as some state worker, somewhere is getting a pay raise.

The Texas State Employees Union (TSEU) adopts a no-comment policy on the recent state school firings, while eagerly engaging a grass-roots campaign to "ensure quality services to the People of Texas," and "defeat privatization, downsizing, and other attacks on workers and public services." Perfect. Even when it is shown that state workers are sexually abusing the children in their care and children have died on the watch of CPS, these very same state workers must be defended if "quality services" are to continue to be provided to Texans. It is time for a reality check.

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The Case for the Private Sector

The fundamental problem with the public sector is that the supposed prerogatives of the bureaucrat are placed above the clear needs of program beneficiaries and often to the detriment of the taxpayer. State workers may occasionally be fired, but ultimately the same systems and management structures remain in place. Adherence to the law and ethical practices must never be tethered to pay scales, otherwise good conduct is always up for sale.

The private sector, on the other hand, has an incentive to perform well because profit and reputation are at stake. When private contractor Accenture and the State mutually ended their contract for welfare eligibility determination in March 2007, the contractor was only paid for work that had been completed. No such fiscal accountability is possible where state workers are concerned. In contracting with private companies, the state can (and does) establish higher performance targets that it expects the contractor to meet.

After repeated episodes in which state workers have failed to do their job, the case for further outsourcing is stronger than ever. Paying state workers more money and expecting them to do a better job is a false promise to taxpayers and the people served by government programs. The accountability and performance targets of the private sector are needed to improve the delivery of government services and provide value for taxpayers.

Get Involved

Each Interim, the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute hosts issue-specific Task Forces that bring public and private sector participants together to address the most pressing issues before the state. One of our eight Task Forces for this Interim is the Outsourcing and Privatization Task Force. The next meeting of the Outsourcing and Privatization Task Force will be on June 3 in Austin.

If you would like more information or want to become involved in the Task Force please contact TCCRI Task Force Director, Brent Connett (brent@txccri.org). Brent can be reached by phone at 512-474-6042.