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SOME SOCIAL SPENDING PROBLEMS

If the 1984 election meant anything, it meant a consensus -- or at least an awakening of the American people -- that liberal spending programs not only don't solve social problems, they become part of the problem itself. This awakening is reflected in recent reports in liberal newspapers on the difficulties of various social programs. Let's look at two examples.

Community colleges are now experiencing what they call an identity crisis. When they became part of our educational system about two decades ago, the rationale was to provide a community-level stepping stone to four-year university degrees, professional careers, and vocational skills for the poor and for those seeking career changes in mid-life.

The community college system was founded on the concept that our society owes "everybody" a college education. We seemed to forget that most of the jobs of the world do not require a college education.

Recent newspaper articles report increasing complaints that too many community college students are just wasting a year or two before dropping out, or are middle- or upper-income adults taking tax-subsidized courses in hobbies or other leisure activities. Fewer than 10% of community college students go on to a four-year college.

The president of the California Community College Board of Governors says that many of the students arriving at the community colleges are "illiterate." He added, "We just can't take people with a second-grade reading level and try to give them marketable or other skills."

If community colleges are merely teaching students what they should have learned in high school, that is not only a cheat on the taxpayers, but even more is a cheat on the students. Students are beginning to catch on to this deception and enrollment is steadily declining, much faster than can be explained by demographic trends.

Enrollment in California's two-year community colleges has declined 23% in the last three years and is still going down. Enrollment in the nine community colleges in the Los

Angeles system has declined from 136,000 in 1982 to 80,000 today. Black student enrollment has declined 17%.

Of course, many students benefited; it would be impossible to spend so much money and not accomplish some good. But does that good justify taking money from others who do not benefit and who would rather spend their money on more pressing priorities?

Another example of liberal overspending for pie-in-the-sky goals was the federal spending for hospital expansion. The high costs of hospital care are now admitted to be partially caused by the large number of empty beds whose costs must be covered by those who use the occupied beds. The number of unused beds has increased dramatically in the last couple of years.

New York State Health Department officials recently admitted that one-quarter of the hospital beds in New York City are unused and unnecessary. This oversupply (estimated at 8,700 hospital beds in New York City) wastes hundreds of millions of dollars because public and private health-care funds pay for their upkeep whether they are occupied or empty.

New York City is not a "worst case" in the empty-bed hospital-cost problem. New York City hospital occupancy rates consistently run 10% higher than for the nation as a whole -- 87% for New York City compared with 75% nationally in 1982.

The principal reason for the high-cost unused-bed problem is the obvious: we built too many beds. If that were the result of a business mistake by a private-enterprise entrepreneur, we could say that's his loss.

But that's not what happened. It's the taxpayers' loss because we were first taxed to build the unnecessary beds, and then both taxpayers and those who pay for private health insurance must pay the higher overhead caused by the unnecessary beds.

Another reason for empty beds offered by state health officials is a "marked decrease in hospital surgery" and "the increasing use of second surgical opinions." What that means is that there must have been a lot of unnecessary surgery.

Some economists and social scientists are now talking about what they call "the Great Society Hangover." That means the persistent burden on our economy caused by the profligate expansion in spending for noble goals which started in 1965, and continues to escalate every year, even when experience has invalidated both the goal and the method.