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# Neb. Lawmakers Open Session: Child Welfare A Focus

BY GRANT SCHULTE  
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska's troubled child welfare system was targeted Wednesday as lawmakers opened their annual session with a handful of proposals that would give the state greater control over services private contractors currently provide for neglected and abused children.

Some of the child welfare measures expected in the session's first days could signal a showdown with Gov. Dave Heineman, who has voiced support for Nebraska's ongoing privatization effort but pledged to work with lawmakers on a compromise. One bill expected to be filed as early as this week would take case management duties away from private contractors and return them to the public sector.

At least three other measures aimed at increasing the Legislature's oversight of child welfare services were introduced Wednesday among 78 wide-ranging bills and a proposed constitutional amendment. Proposals introduced on the opening day included a tax on soda to combat child obesity, a ban on texting while driving commercial vehicles and a doubling of the barrels of beer Nebraska microbreweries can produce each year.

Child welfare reform has emerged as one of the largest issues the state's unicameral Legislature faces this session following the release last month of a legislative report that recommended a return to state-run case management services.

The report also called for the creation of a new state Department of Children's Services and a commission that would examine the alleged problems with the current system.

The report reflected complaints aired during months of legislative hearings on child welfare throughout Nebraska: unmanageable workloads and high turnover among case workers, poor training and communication, a lack of oversight, inflated costs and few signs of improvement.

Heineman, a Republican, has expressed concern over the reform effort's potential cost. Republicans outnumber Democrats 33-15 in the officially nonpartisan Legislature, but lawmakers who support an overhaul say the investment is critical to protect children.

The privatization effort began when the division signed contracts with five lead agencies to offer and coordinate child services statewide. Three of the five providers have dropped out, citing financial shortfalls, which forced the state and the remaining lead agencies to take over their cases.

Omaha Sen. Gwen Howard said members of the Health and Human Services Committee will sponsor a bill later this week that would have the state take back control of case management duties from private contractors.

"This is an opportunity for us to put a good system in place, and for the state to take responsibility in the delivery of services and protections for children," said Howard, a Democrat who spent 34 years as a state social worker.

State Sen. Bob Krist of Omaha and 11

colleagues submitted a bill that would require the Department of Health and Human Services to perform a cost-benefit analysis of contracts with private providers that serve children. The bill would require the analysis for medical, behavioral, or developmental services for contracts worth more than \$25 million.

Howard proposed a measure that would set a yearly Sept. 15 deadline for the Department of Health and Human Services to report to lawmakers how its services are improving, until 2014. She also introduced a bill that would require anyone paid by the state to record their hours, to address concerns about poor documentation from workers.

Officials with one of the remaining lead contractors, KVC Nebraska, have said many of the recommendations are a step backward.

Besides the proposed child welfare reforms, legislative Speaker Mike Flood said he expects top issues at the session to include an insurance exchange program required under the new national health care law and a proposal that would give cities the ability to seek voter approval of sales tax increases.

Flood told lawmakers that Thursday will mark the 75th anniversary of the first meeting of Nebraska's Unicameral Legislature, a one-house body that first convened in 1937. A 1934 constitutional amendment eliminated Nebraska's House of Representatives in an effort to lower costs and increase efficiency.

Lawmakers adjourned for the day after roughly an hour of bill introductions. The process runs for the session's first 10 days.

## Oil Industry Chief Warns Obama On Canada Pipeline

BY MATTHEW DALY  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The oil industry's top lobbyist warned the Obama administration Wednesday to approve the Keystone XL oil pipeline or face "huge political consequences" in an election year.

Jack Gerard, president of the American Petroleum Institute, said it would be a "huge mistake" for President Barack Obama to reject the 1,700-mile, Canada-to-Texas pipeline. Obama faces a Feb. 21 deadline to decide whether the \$7 billion pipeline is in the national interest.

"Clearly, the Keystone XL pipeline is in the national interest," Gerard said at the trade association's annual "State of American Energy" event. "A determination to decide anything less than that I believe will have huge political consequences."

Gerard said the oil group has teamed up with at least 15 unions to support the pipeline, which would create thousands of jobs.

"We will stand shoulder to shoulder" with labor unions that have backed the pipeline, including the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department, Gerard said.

"Over the next 60 days, they will not be silent," he said.

Gerard repeatedly referred to the Keystone pipeline at his annual speech assessing the energy industry, calling it the business group's top near-term priority.

While the pipeline has not been a focus of the GOP race for president, Gerard said the issue has the potential to become a major factor in the general election.

"It's already an election issue" in the presidential race and is likely to be a focus of several U.S. Senate races, Gerard said, calling the pipeline the largest "shovel-ready" project in the country.

The pipeline, proposed by Calgary-based TransCanada, would carry oil derived from tar sands in western Canada to refineries in Texas, passing through Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma.

TransCanada says the pipeline could create as many as 20,000 jobs over two years, a figure opponents say is inflated. A State Department report last summer said the

pipeline would create up to 6,000 jobs during construction.

The pipeline proposal has forced the White House to make a politically risky choice between two key Democratic constituencies. Many unions back the project as a job creator in a down economy, while environmental groups fear it could lead to an oil spill disaster.

A payroll tax law signed by Obama just before Christmas includes a Republican-sponsored provision that sets a Feb. 21 deadline for Obama to decide on the pipeline. The administration is warning it would rather say no than rush a decision in an election year.

Environmental advocates, already disappointed with Obama's failure to achieve climate change legislation and his decision to delay new smog standards, have made it clear that approval of the pipeline would dampen their enthusiasm in his bid for re-election.

Some liberal donors even threatened to cut off funds to Obama's re-election campaign to protest the project, which opponents say would transport "dirty oil" that requires huge amounts of energy to extract.

If he rejects the pipeline, Obama risks losing support from organized labor, a key part of the Democratic base, for thwarting jobs.

Obama appeared to have skirted what some dubbed the "Keystone conundrum" in November when the State Department announced it was postponing a decision on the pipeline until after this year's election. Officials said they needed extra time to study routes that avoid an environmentally sensitive area of Nebraska that supplies water to eight states.

The affected area stretches just 65 miles through the Sandhills region of northern Nebraska, but the concerns were serious enough that the state's governor and senators opposed the project until the pipeline was moved.

Republican Gov. Dave Heineman, who opposed the initial route, says he supports efforts to accelerate the project, noting that provisions in the payroll tax bill allow the project developer to find a new route avoiding the Sandhills.

There was no immediate response from the White House.

## Corps

From Page 1

throughout the coming year," she said.

### REPAIRS PLANNED FOR GAVINS POINT DAM

Assessments of flood damage to Gavins Point Dam were nearly completed when the *Press & Dakotan* spoke recently with Dave Becker, the operations project manager at the facility.

"We just have a little bit of inspecting yet where we'll have some climbers come in and look at our spillway gates," he said. "There was just minor damage to the spillway. We're not sure what the damage is to the riprap below the dam, but we'll have some work to do there, too."

Erosion about six feet high, four feet wide and six inches deep has been documented on the south wall of the spillway. Work to the weirs, which are the concrete areas where the water comes through the spillway, will also be completed. That had been scheduled for 2011, but flooding prevented the work, Becker said.

Also on the agenda is installing 25 new relief wells below the dam.

"They keep the water level low below the dam so water doesn't seep under it and want to come up right away and cause erosion," Becker stated. "The 46 relief wells currently in place didn't fail. They're just 50 years old and don't have the capacity they used to have."

The relief wells drain into Lake Yankton. "If it weren't for the relief wells, Lake Yankton would be dry because it's the old river channel," Becker said. "About 300

gallons per minute comes from the relief wells into Lake Yankton."

Work on the relief wells will cost about \$2 million. Meanwhile, the spillway work will be approximately \$200,000.

Corps staff will also be familiarizing themselves with the changes along the Missouri River. For example, Becker said the flooding tripled the number of sandbars below the dam.

"The sandbars that were built downstream were made from the riverbed scouring deeper and the washing away of river banks," he said, pointing out that the sand did not come from above the dam. "It's probably going to provide a lot of habitat for the piping plover and least tern (which are endangered birds)."

Near Ponca, Neb., Becker said it is estimated that the river has scoured down about six feet.

"But the hydrologists say that after scouring like that, there is some rebound after a year or two, so it probably won't end up being quite that drastic," he added.

Becker has not seen any numbers regarding scouring below Gavins Point Dam.

He said he is pleased with the scrutiny the Corps is receiving in the flood aftermath.

"If you really want to improve, don't you want a lot of really good suggestions coming at you from the newspapers, cities, the independent panel and so on? I think we've gotten awesome feedback, and we'll take it seriously," Becker said.

Between that input and the experience gained by the Corps and other entities along the river, preparation for the next flood event will be improved, he stated.

"I'm grateful for that. I just wish it hadn't come at such a high price," Becker said.

## Factory Orders Rise, But Business Investment Slips

WASHINGTON (AP) — Orders for factory-made goods that signal business investment plans fell for a second straight month, part of a mixed report on manufacturing in November.

The drop in demand for so-called core capital goods was offset by a sharp rise in volatile airplane orders. That lifted overall factory orders 1.8 percent, the Commerce Department said Wednesday.

Core capital goods, such as computers and electronic equipment, are closely watched because they are a good proxy for business investment.

Still, the decline may end up being less of a concern after a private survey showed earlier this week that U.S. factories ended the year with their best month of growth since late spring.

Factories hired more workers last month, saw the most growth in new orders since April and ramped up production, the Institute for Supply Management said Tuesday.

John Ryding and Conrad DeQuadros, economists with RDQ Economics, said economists are more likely to overlook the weak report on factory orders after seeing the ISM survey.

"This report for November activity feels like somewhat old news since the state of manufacturing in December has already been indicated in yesterday's ISM report and it appears from that survey that manufacturing growth is picking up," the economists wrote in a note to clients.

A bigger issue may be the impact that Europe's debt troubles could have on U.S. export growth. Many economists believe that Europe, a major market for American goods, has already slipped into a recession.

## CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS 44 Make

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18 Kansas 7 Split of a

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20 Lobster 8 Level

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21 Horse 27 Chips buy

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23 Screenshot 28 Blue hue

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43 Release 42

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### Yesterday's answer

11 Diner	30 Sushi
drinks	choice
17 "— see it	33 Embank-
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19 Mess up	34 News
22 Boris'	item
cartoon	35 Transmits
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ally	jobs
25 Limited in	38 Commo-
range	tions
27 Chips buy	42 Band
28 Blue hue	blaster

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1-5

A X Y D L B A A X R  
is L O N G F E L L O W

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-5 CRYPTOQUOTE  
Q U U M F P W L M A K V Q U U M F P

X E Q A W P J Q S W A L P M  
E D F P . — I M L Q M F P Q S Y V

SYLLQP  
Yesterday's Cryptoquote: EDUCATION IS AN ORNAMENT FOR THE PROSPEROUS, A REFUGE FOR THE UNFORTUNATE. — DEMOCRITUS