

State's frugality has hurt too many Texans

By Bill Hobby

Texas just has not gotten the credit it is due from President Bush and his administration.

The president has been generous with defense contracts and farm subsidies. But Texas certainly deserves more praise for faithfully adhering to GOP principles on health and human services.

We don't coddle the poor in Texas. We expect them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, to be rugged individualists. If they don't have a job, they should get one. If they don't have an oil well, they should get one, as Eddie Chiles used to say when he was mad.

None of these "liberal Democratic tax-and-spend policies" for Texas. As the 1992 Republican platform says repeatedly, a good dose of personal and parental responsibility will cure most ills.

Texas is just the kind of state Presidents Reagan and Bush advocate. Texas certainly hasn't thrown money at the problems. We've been frugal. Texas ranks:

49th among the states in expenditures on public welfare.

47th in the amount of grants to families in poverty.

49th in per capita spending for mental health services.

48th in the number of needy women provided early prenatal care.

45th in the number of eligible women provided nutrition help under the Women, Infants and Children program.

49th in state tax burden as a percentage of the state's gross product.

We don't believe in welfare Cadillacs here -- it's pretty hard to make the payments on a grant of \$57 per child per month.

By GOP standards, Texas should be a national leader on social problems.

In a way, we are. Texas ranks:

First in the number of people without health insurance.

First in the number of births to girls 14 years and younger.

Second in violent crime rates and property crime rates; second in the number of persons incarcerated.

Seventeenth in local taxes as a percentage of the state's gross product.

One of every four children lives in poverty. One of every five drops out of school. One in eight is born with conditions causing development problems.

The state wants to provide better schools and a better safety net to our more vulnerable citizens -- but the state is out of money. So the state cuts the budget and minimizes the state tax increase.

Of course, this strategy means higher local taxes. Congress unloads the welfare costs onto the states that, in turn, unload education costs onto school districts.

But do we save money? No. What we save on prevention, we spend on damage control. Our tax dollars are stretched treating the medically indigent, providing expensive care for premature babies born to young mothers who got no prenatal care. Just a few visits to the doctor can avoid many birth defects.

We spend billions building prisons -- 25,000 more beds in the last two years -- and still our county jails are bursting and our citizens live in fear of crime.

Industry spends hundreds of thousands of dollars retraining workers who were not adequately educated - many times because they were not prepared to learn when they reached school age.

What we are doing is not working. It is not successful nor cost effective. Maybe Ronald Reagan and Dan Quayle are wrong. Maybe we can't solve our health and human service problems with more lectures on family values. Maybe our problems aren't solely the result of "lifestyle choices."

Maybe we do need to spend money on prenatal care, Operation Head Start and drug abuse prevention instead of prisons. Maybe we need to add more 3-year-old and 4-year-old kindergarten classes and early-childhood intervention programs instead of more detoxification units.

Maybe we should spend more on parent education instead of on psychiatric hospitals and intensive care units.

As both parties are saying these days, it's time for a change.

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