

from Oxygen, pg. 5

Social Security recipients, generally categorized as “middle class.” They represent about 50 percent of oxygen users in Centre County. Medicare payment policy for oxygen, which constitutes less than one percent of the Medicare budget, serves as a yardstick for insurance industry reimbursement rates and the state’s insurance for the poor, Medicaid.

Cost-cutting efforts in oxygen also extend to other durable medical equipment, such as walkers, canes, wheelchairs, and power chairs, which Centre County suppliers sell. Congress and regulators say their efforts reduce well-documented instances of fraud and abuse. These dual efforts, local suppliers say, have been misguided and have resulted in curtailing patients’ legitimate needs.

“Our company will suffer half a million dollar in losses from federal oxygen cuts,” said Dick’s Homecare’s Manager Jim Young. “We will have to be very budget conscious.”

Barr at T&B Medical echoed the concern. “We are going to have to screen every new Medicare customer very carefully,” he said. His wife Barb wondered whether their company could continue to supply oxygen to Medicare patients.

“Maybe, we should only accept cash-paying customers and not have to spend so much time on the Medicare and insurance paperwork,” she said.

And even the biggest player in the game isn’t safe.

“Three years ago American HomePatient was easily positioned to gobble up Travis’ company and mine,” Young said. In the nine months ending Sept. 30, 2008, American HomePatient had a national net loss nearing \$1 million.

Major industry players have warned the Securities and Exchange Commission of the impact of on-going Medicare regulations.

“The Company cannot predict future reim-

bursement for oxygen equipment, but it believes that any significant decrease in the current 36 month rental period or reimbursement rate will have a substantial and material negative financial impact to the Company,” American HomePatient told the SEC in 2008. “Additionally, management believes that a drastic reduction in reimbursement for oxygen equipment would limit access to life-sustaining oxygen required by numerous Medicare beneficiaries.”

That prediction appears to be coming true for local suppliers. Each is suffering severe financial setbacks, service is slowly declining and the threat of massive out-of-town medical providers offering critical services from afar when time matters most is real.

The fraud and abuse claim

Medicare critics claim costs have “skyrocketed” and attribute much of that to well-documented fraud and abuse. Oxygen has an especially bad reputation detailed in the Department of Health and Human Services Inspector General reports. Additionally, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reports and numerous convictions of bad people who have done bad things have led Washington lawmakers to paint all oxygen suppliers with the same brush of corruption. Oxygen and durable medical equipment have become the focus of negative articles in such “liberal” publications as *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.

Three years ago, a staff member to Pennsylvania’s Rep. John Murtha reportedly said, “Supplying oxygen is like having your own ATM.” Powerful “liberal” members of Congress hate oxygen with a special flame. Pete Stark (D-Calif.) who runs a critical health Ways and Means subcommittee, told *The New York Times*, “It doesn’t seem sensible that a small industry should be able to manipulate the entire U.S. Congress into

overpaying for oxygen. But that’s the world we live in now.”

It is, therefore, not surprising that in December 2005, when the Bush Administration decided to gut the oxygen program, House Democrats let Bush’s supporters get away with calling a vote at 5:04 a.m., just before Christmas. Nor is it surprising that last month one influential Washington Medicare policymaker whispered over the phone to a *Voices* reporter, “I can’t talk about that. Oxygen is too hot to handle.”

If T&B goes under because oxygen reimbursements have been cut and subject to delays, State College will also lose its only mobility device (scooter) repair facility.

The widow of an American HomePatient client who died last month spoke to the crucial support the supplier gave her, saying the company “was very considerate” of her husband’s needs.

This county needs its oxygen suppliers.

What federal policymakers say

“Looking at savings on solely a balance sheet is not a smart government solution,” Rep. Glenn “G.T.” Thompson (R-Pa.) told *Voices*. “If the number of smaller home providers of Durable Medical Equipment (DME) declines, I am concerned that more homecare patients will need to be hospitalized, due to a lack of access. Congress and CMS should be working to keep homebound Medicare recipients in their homes. The quality of life is better for the patient and has overall cost savings for Medicare,” said Thompson, who represents Centre County in Congress. “When there is more competition in the DME market, the costs will also decline and ultimately the end user will have more choice – this is a policy direction we should be heading in.”

Thompson, who worked 26 years as a health care professional, said he has seen for himself the benefits of homecare.

“I am very familiar with the value and improved quality of life that homecare provides to Medicare recipients and believe that no homebound Medicare beneficiary should have to worry about servicing and maintaining their own oxygen equipment,” he told *Voices*. “There has been the misconception that providers of DME are all after a quick buck and look to defraud Medicare routinely. This is completely untrue. While there has been fraud identified by CMS, they have quickly increased oversight to identify these cases and make sure that fraud can be prevented in the future. It’s a shame that hard working men and women in many of these small businesses have been affected by this stigma.”

Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) is also intent to address the issue.

“Sen. Casey is committed to working with his colleagues and the new administration to create a fair Medicare oxygen payment system that allows companies to receive adequate reimbursement for both equipment and services,” Kendra Barkoff, Casey’s press secretary, told *Voices*. “Mom-and-pop suppliers are the most vulnerable to reimbursement cuts and increased regulation and we must work to ensure they have the resources to provide our older citizens and other Medicare beneficiaries with the care they need.”

How long local suppliers can hold out and who will come out on top only time will tell. In the end, it’s the dire need for medical oxygen that drives them to keep serving their customers.

Dick’s Homecare General Manager Jim Young sounded a lot like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, when he explained why he’s still doing it, often at a loss.

“We have an obligation to serve our customers,” he said, “because their lives depend on us.”

Joel Solkoff is the author of The Politics of Food.

State College Peace Center
www.scpeacecenter.org



February 5: *The 11th Hour*: Global warming, deforestation, species extinction, and depletion of the oceans' habitat are explored.

February 19: Don't miss speaker Andrew Miller! He will speak about his work as an **Environmental & Human Rights Campaigner with Amazon Watch.**

February 26: *Constantine's Sword*: The story of James Carroll, a former Catholic priest on a journey to confront his past and uncover the roots of religiously inspired violence and war.

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Is the past threatening your future??

from Inauguration, pg. 3

antiwar and pro-war people had come to petition their government for redress of their grievances. On this day 500,000 had come not to protest but to celebrate a sea change in American history.

The We Are One concert was spectacular, wonderfully produced by George Stevens Jr. (who I had worked with on the Emmy Award-winning *Separate but Equal*). It was a combination Woodstock, March on Washington, Mardi Gras, and a PBS special on the history of American leadership. There were poetic and political readings, opera, rock and roll, country, folk and inspirational hymns. Some of my favorite moments included Tom Hanks reading excerpts from Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, Garth Brooks and a mixed choir doing *Shout* and Bruce Springsteen and Pete Seeger doing all the verses of *This Land is Your Land*. Somehow that song never seemed truer than at that moment. I think Pete and Rev. Lowery who gave the benediction, may have been the only ones on the stage who had been there in '63.

Monday was taken up with a pilgrimage to John F. Kennedy's eternal flame at

Arlington, and his brother Bobby's simple gravesite, nearby. They were two men who were killed trying to bring their own form of "hope" to our boomer generation. We also visited some family members buried at the national cemetery. Later we visited another shrine to our time, the Vietnam Memorial. Later that night about a thousand activists gathered at Dupont Circle to have a purification ritual. We lit incense, chanted and sang songs to chase the "evil spirits" out of the White House. A few threw shoes at a large blow-up caricature of soon-to-be-former President Bush.

This was all a prelude to Tuesday, the day of the Inauguration. In the morning, we marched a portion of the way to the Mall carrying the Obama-Biden poster which had adorned the front of our house during the campaign. We gathered a little contingent of State College/PSU supporters. At least 50 other people wanted to take a picture of themselves next to the sign or of just the sign itself. There was chanting and singing along the way, a pre-inaugural parade.

We went to our selected spot, on the right side of the reflecting pool facing the Lincoln Memorial. It was where I had stuck my feet in the water during King's speech back in 1963. This time it was a little cold-

er. I had to crack the ice to ceremoniously dip my foot in. We couldn't see the capitol except on the giant JumboTron. Though we were in D.C. like most everyone else in the world we watched it on television. But, it didn't matter; we were there. We were joined by a few other locals.

Then came the moment that some had traveled thousands of miles and stood in the subfreezing cold to be part of - The Inauguration. Parents held their children up to see the screen. Fathers told smiling babies that they were watching history. Black and white folks beamed with pride. Old people held hands sharing sacred memories. It got strangely quiet. After he took the oath everyone in the crowd that I could see was doing several things in various combinations: laughing, crying, shouting, screaming and hugging somebody. In fact, everybody seemed to be hugging everybody. There were no strangers here; we were all part of a community - the American community. Without a doubt this was the most diverse group of citizens that I have ever seen gathered anywhere for a single event. It was also the largest. There were 2 million people in the crowd. Police reported that there was not a single arrest.

"This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed, why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall."

As the president spoke it was clear that he meant to continue America's march toward destiny. "This is the journey we continue today." He sought to transform a political campaign into a social movement. A difficult process. Those of us old community organizers understand that movements come FROM the people not TO the people. Leaders may inspire us and articulate the need and parameters of change, but it is the people who create the circumstances and manifest the mechanisms for transformation through their commitment, struggle and sacrifice.

Washington rode the boat across the Delaware, but it was those shopkeepers and farmers who fired the muskets which brought about independence. Frederick Douglass articulated the horrors of slavery but it was the thousands of slaves who resisted, escaped on the Underground Railroad, and ultimately picked up weapons to bring their own freedom. Lincoln orated brilliantly at Gettysburg but it was those who fought and died at Gettysburg and Vicksburg and Shiloh who gave those words meaning. King's leadership in the Montgomery boycott inspired us but it was those unnamed and uncelebrated blacks in Montgomery who walked to work for over a year that brought about the end of segregated buses. His words at the '63 March were transformative but without the quarter of million people there to witness, they would have been as coins thrown into a empty well.

President Obama, also a former community organizer, understands that change must come from the people not from the leadership. But, he also understands that without a leadership willing to listen and change with the people, the process is doomed.

"...Those of us who manage the public's knowledge will be held to account, to spend wisely, reform bad habits and do our business in the light of day, because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government."

We, like the tree by the water, listened, knowing that hope for a better world, though not assured, was once again possible. We had a president who promised to work for it, and, 2 million committed American citizens who had come to witness and hopefully, ready to "carry forth that great gift of freedom and deliver it safely to future generations."

Charles Dumas is an associate professor at Penn State and a former community organizer.



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Keep Voices going strong! Details on Pg. 11 of this issue.

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Community and Lifestyles**State High class a service to community**

by Maggie O'Keefe

Walking through the halls of State College Area High School there is a classroom door that is bare except for a blue Star of Life sticker. During class hours the door remains closed and the only thing a passerby can see is that lone sticker on the door.

Inside, State High's David Hamilton is teaching 16 students what that sticker represents.

"You must remember to do a DCAP-BTLS assessment; this should take no less than 60-90 seconds in a good case." Hamilton tells his class of aspiring Emergency Medical Technicians, or EMTs, during a lesson on rapid trauma assessment.

One of State High's accredited programs is the Career and Technical Program that allows students to advance their studies of specific academics. One section of the program is Public Safety taught by Hamilton, a class instituted in 1999 after the Health Professions program was cut from lack of interest.

"I didn't know it [becoming an EMT] was that accessible. The class opened up a whole new world of possibilities."

--Daniel Forester

That year, Hamilton answered an ad in the paper for a Public Safety teacher and started work on making curricula for his EMT, CSI, Police Operations, Fire Fighting Investigation, and Introduction to Sports Medicine classes.

Last spring, after almost 10 years of operation within the school walls, Hamilton certified his 50th EMT who like many of the others, went on to volunteer their time and talents around the State College area. Hamilton's class produces an average of eight EMTs a year. Centre Life Link EMS, Seven Mountains EMS, and Penn State EMS also hold a yearly EMT training class but Hamilton's students are all between 16 and 18 years old.

Daniel Forester, 20, and Daniel Phillips, 21, are graduates of Hamilton's EMT class who volunteer at Centre Life Link EMS, Port Matilda EMS, Moshannon Valley EMS, and the Port Matilda Fire Company.

"I didn't know it [becoming an EMT]

was that accessible," Forester said. "The class opened up a whole new world of possibilities."

Both of the volunteer EMTs wanted to learn more about anatomy and medicine after growing up curious about the subject.

"My really good friend worked either part time or full time for Life Link, and he took me to the old Alpha house and showed me the ambulances; that's where it started with me," Forester explained. His friend told him about Hamilton's class and he signed up the next year.

Phillips' curiosity was started by Boy Scout first aid training. His curiosity continues even after three years of volunteering at Centre Life Link.

"You gotta keep learning; everyday I'm on an ambulance I'm learning," Phillips said. "The potential is there to learn how to be an EMT, you just have to want it. Anyone could study and pass the tests, but you don't advance to become an EMT unless you have an initiative."

Hamilton's class appears to spark that ini-

tiative.

Every student in his year-long EMT class this year wants to either become an EMT or continue into the medical field.

"It's a really good class, it's really interesting and it teaches you the basics in case something comes up, you'll know what to do," said Justin O'Brien, a senior at State High and a current student of Hamilton's.

Fifty EMTs in nine years doesn't seem like a lot in view of State High's student body total, but Hamilton is not concerned.

"I've seen an increase [in students who sign up] over the years," the instructor said. "I think it takes time to build up the program."

With an average of 10 students per class in preceding years, Hamilton is overwhelmed by the recent increase in enrollment, especially since he's seen volunteerism decreasing in the community the last 10 years.

"The state says that the EMT is a high



Photo by Maggie O'Keefe

State High's David Hamilton, who teaches the EMT course, lectures to a full class of students.

priority job," Hamilton said. "Therefore EMT programs usually get special attention because we need them, bad, and I don't know if that is the case all across the country but it certainly is here in Pennsylvania."

Alums say this job is for the young and those with free time to give.

"Get 'em early!" Phillips exclaimed. "I see most of the volunteers coming into Life Link are fresh out of high school or retirees who have to the time to volunteer."

"Yea, here in Centre County

Pennsylvania EMS is more volunteer based than paid," Forster added.

This year, after seeing the heightened interest in Hamilton's classes, State High brought back the Health Professions program, taking the anatomy and medical terminology classes out of Hamilton's hands.

"I think the Public Safety program did help the awareness [of medical-related classes]. A lot of that was my teaching the Anatomy and Physiology class," Hamilton said.

Save the Date!

Voices Annual Fun! Raiser Monday, March 23, 2009

5 p.m. - 8 p.m.

India Pavilion—State College

Watch for details in the March issue of Voices
and at www.voicesweb.org

Crisis social services guide for Centre County

It's cold outside, and jobs are scarce. As a service to readers, *Voices* has compiled the following list of Centre County groups and government agencies devoted to providing assistance to local residents in need.

A complete guide to Centre County nonprofits is available at www.voicesweb.org

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE/FOOD/SHELTER

Community Help Centre
24-Hour Hotline 814-237-5855 or toll free:
800-494-2500

Web site: www.communityhelpcentre.com
Offers referrals to shelters, counseling, transportation, food and more.

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown
Phone: 353-0502

Web site: www.ajdiocese.org/min/css.html
Offers emergency financial assistance.

HEALTH CARE

Centre County Office of Mental Health/Mental Retardation-Drug and Alcohol
Phone: 355-6782

E-mail: cjwaltz@co.centre.pa.us

Web site: www.co.centre.pa.us/561.asp

Offers treatment options to persons with mental illnesses, as well as services to those with drug and alcohol abuse issues.

Centre County Prescription Discount Card
Phone: 355-6768

Web site: www.co.centre.pa.us/rx

A card available to all Centre County residents that allows for savings on prescription drugs not covered by insurance.

HOUSING AND HEATING ASSISTANCE

Centre County Basic Needs Task Force
Phone: 1-800-494-2500

Web site: www.co.centre.pa.us/needs

A help line for food, heating, shelter or transportation needs and financial assistance for heating costs.

The Centre County Housing Authority
Phone: 355-6750

E-mail: rwholder@comcast.net

Web site: www.co.centre.pa.us/815.asp

Operates a Section 8 Rental Assistance Program that assists low-income families/individuals in paying their rent.

Also provides safe and sanitary housing.

Housing Transitions, Inc.

Phone: 237-4863

Web site: www.housingtransitions.com

A nonprofit providing housing services.

Interfaith Mission

Phone: 234-7731

Web site: <http://interfaithmission@centre-connect.org>

Provides emergency assistance so that low-income citizens can meet their basic needs.

LEGAL

Center for Alternatives in Community Justice (CACJ)

Phone: 234-1059

Web site: <http://www.cacj.us/>

Works with the justice system to rehabilitate offenders through community service.

Domestic Relations Section

Phone: 355-6741

Web site: www.co.centre.pa.us/281.asp

A child service agency that establishes and enforces support.

MidPenn Legal Services

Phone: 238-4958

Web site: www.midpenn.org

A nonprofit, public-interest law firm dedicated to serving low-income residents and victims of domestic violence.

VICTIM SERVICES

Centre County Women's Resource Center
Phone: 877-234-5050 (toll-free) and 234-5050

Web site: www.ccwrc.org

Provides free, confidential counseling and services for victims of domestic abuse or sexual assault 24 hours a day.

Centre County Victim Witness Office

Phone: 548-1107

E-mail: feburger@co.centre.pa.us

Web site: www.co.centre.pa.us/da/vic-wit.asp

Offers information and assistance to victims and their family members.

Additional listings at www.voicesweb.org

The Centre County United Way Web site (<http://www.ccunitedway.org/>), The Centre County Government Web site (<http://www.co.centre.pa.us/>) and Centre Connect (<http://www.centreconnect.org/>) were invaluable in compiling this list.
Compiled by Justin Eisinger.

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LGBT community's reactions to inauguration passionate

by Delia Guzman

The mood at Chumley's Bar in downtown State College Jan. 20, Inauguration Day, was festive and optimistic as about 30 patrons celebrated President Barack Obama's swearing-in. The bar caters to a local lesbian/gay/transgendered community that was eager to hear what the controversial evangelical preacher Rick Warren would say during the event.

The bar opened at 11:30 a.m. for the all-day event, and it was standing-room-only by 11:45 a.m. The first vocal reaction offered by the crowd was a chorus of boos for former president George W. Bush, including many shouts of "Go home to Texas!"

When Warren, who recently supported Proposition 8 in California to ban gay marriage, began his invocation, the boos increased in both volume and tenor.

Near the end of his five-minute prayer, in which he at first seemed to make attempts at inclusiveness by saying that God "loves all," Warren invoked Jesus Christ -- albeit in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Hebrew -- and led the audience in the Lord's Prayer, a

decidedly Christian tradition.

Reaction was swift.

"Overall, I would've preferred a secular event, rather than this bracketing of events with prayers and benedictions," Little said. "But I thought that it was quite tragic that it wasn't inclusive at all of non-Christians. It seemed to me like it was a concession to the religious right, rather than a gesture of President Obama's promise of inclusiveness."

Still, some took a different view of the president's choice of Warren to lead the prayer.

"I see Barack Obama as a unifier," said Matt Callahan, a post-doctoral researcher at Penn State. "He is committed to bringing people of all views, ideologies and faiths together. Because of this, I was not offended by his choice of Rev. Rick Warren. "Warren spoke of compassion, of civility and of Americans being united by freedom and justice," Callahan said. "To me, this is how we can begin to find some common ground. Barack Obama shows true courage, the courage to sit, converse and find common ground with people of wildly different opinions than his own."

As was the case on election night in November, Obama drew hearty cheers and applause from the Chumley's crowd, but this time he spoke for the first time as president of the United States. President Obama used inclusive language during his 18-minute inaugural address, citing various



Photo by Delia Guzman
Stefan Little, originally from Canada, thought the inauguration should have been secular: "The U.S. is supposed to be a secular nation, after all."

religions and even "non-believers." Further, he stressed his commitment to breaking with the precedents established by the previous administration, especially with regard to diplomacy and torture.

"I was impressed with his openness to working with other nations," said David Counselman, a doctoral candidate in Spanish Linguistics at Penn State. "He really wants to repair our relationships with other countries."

After the president's impassioned and serious speech, Rev. Joseph Lowery offered a benediction that ended with a humorous tone that evoked both the tone of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the slang of the 1960s: "...in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get back, when brown can stick around, when yellow will be mellow, when the red man can get ahead, man, and when white will embrace what is right."

Many in the bar chuckled at Lowery's words, and one patron who preferred not to give his name said, "Wow, a religious guy with a sense of humor! You don't see that every day!"

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