Letter: Child care choices lacking in SLT

To the community,

The 2015 Child Care Portfolio was recently released providing information about child care in El Dorado County. The report details information about the child care supply between 2012 and 2014. Despite an improving economy, child care continues to be a challenge for many working families due to the high cost of care and lack of subsidized slots. A minimum wage family will spend 50 percent of their budget on child care. This has forced many families to rely on alternative child care arrangements such as family, friends, and neighbors. The report is available **online**.

El Dorado County child care supply and family data shows a significant decrease in the number of licensed Family Child Care homes (24 percent) between 2012 and 2014. The decrease can be attributed to a reduction in the demand for licensed care that forced struggling providers with high vacancy rates to close.
The reduced demand is supported by:
· 9 percent reduction in the number of children between the age of 0-5 even though the population in the county increased by 2 percent.
· 20 percent reduction in the number of children 0-12 with parents in the labor force.
· 33 percent increase in the number of people living in poverty.
· 5 percent decrease in the number of children in subsidized care.

The increase in the poverty rate and the decrease in subsidized care highlights the struggles many families are experiencing. The cost of licensed care is well beyond the reach of families who are looking for work or working in low wage part time jobs. Families are also struggling to find care during non-traditional hours and Holidays. The South Lake Tahoe community in particular lacks child care providers offering evening, weekend and holiday care. Based on research done by Choices for Children, only one licensed child care home provider will be open on New Year's Eve in South Lake Tahoe. The lack of affordable licensed care and child care options has a negative impact on families, child care providers who serve them and employers.

Choices for Children, a nonprofit resource and referral agency has information on how to become a licensed child care providers and programs to help off-set the cost of licensing fees and readying your home for children. For more information, call 530.541.5848.

Nadine T-Davis, resource coordinator Choices for Children

Ducks Unlimited fires writer over stream access fracas

By Ben Goldfarb, High Country News

On Nov. 9, Don Thomas was headed out his backdoor in Lewistown, Mont., for some whitetail deer bowhunting when his phone rang.

On the line was Matt Young, executive editor at *Ducks Unlimited* magazine, the member publication for the vaunted waterfowl conservation group. Thomas, a physician-turned-journalist, served as the magazine's field editor, and over the years he'd attended more Ducks Unlimited banquets and volunteer events than he could count. He'd also written a back page column since 2001.

But no longer. Young was calling with some stunning news: Effective immediately, Thomas was fired.

The reason had nothing to do with *Ducks Unlimited* magazine. Instead, Thomas was losing his position over an article he'd written for another publication, *Outside Bozeman*. The offending story had detailed the saga of James Cox Kennedy, a billionaire who'd fought for years to block public access to the Ruby River where it passed through his ranch. Thomas' article wasn't impartial – it called Kennedy a "selfish man" with ethical shortcomings, though it did nod to his conservation contributions – but the facts were indisputable. "I think it's within journalistic license to call someone selfish and arrogant when they're clearly being selfish and arrogant," Thomas says.

Unbeknownst to Thomas, however, Kennedy was a major Ducks Unlimited donor and former board member. Now the group's current board, Young said, was in an uproar. "We simply cannot condone this type of vitriol directed by one of our contributing editors toward a dedicated DU volunteer, who is among the nation's most ardent and active waterfowl conservationists," Young told Thomas in a follow-up email. (Ducks Unlimited denies Kennedy had a role in Thomas' firing.)

Read the whole story

Biathlon event open to all

levels

Ed Z’berg-Sugar Pine Point State Park is hosting a family friendly cross country skiing biathlon on Jan. 16.

Dubbed Citizens Against the Clock, participants will ski a trail similar to the cross country biathlon of the 1960 Winter Olympics, then shoot at a target with a laser rifle for accuracy, all while being timed.

Registration is at 10am, with the event at 10:30am. Skis not provided.

It is free. Parking is $5.

Meet near the entrance station in the campground side of the park (west entrance off Highway 89).

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

Sierra House Elementary School fourth-grader Dominic Herron with LTBMU Supervisor Jeff Marsolais. Photo/USFS

· Participating Forest Service offices will offer one free Christmas tree permit to fourth-grade students who present a valid paper voucher or durable **Every Kid in a Park pass**.

· Engel & Völkers, a European-based premium real estate brand, has opened an office in Zephyr Cove.

· The Douglas County Public Library continues its First Saturday of the Month Family Movies on Dec. 5 with "A Dennis the Menace Christmas" from 2-3:30pm at the Minden Library, 1625 Library Lane.

· Tahoe Donner was named most senior-friendly ski resort in California by SeniorsSkiing.com, an online magazine catering to older snowsports enthusiasts.

2015, 2016 likely to be hottest on record

By Tom Miles, Reuters

This year will be the hottest on record and 2016 could be even hotter due to the El Niño weather pattern, the World Meteorological Organization said on Wednesday, warning that inaction on climate change could see global average temperatures rise by 6 degrees Celsius or more.

WMO director-general Michel Jarraud said it was still possible for a global climate summit starting in Paris on Monday to agree steps to could keep the rise within 3.6 Fahrenheit)over pre-industrial times, a target set down in 2010 to try to prevent a dramatic increase in extreme weather.

"But the more we wait for action, the more difficult it will be," he told a news conference.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Professional casino cheat set the bar high

By John L. Smith, Las Vegas Review-Journal

John Vaccaro was sure he had something big working.

But in the world of the professional casino cheat, good help can be hard to find. It's not all "Ocean's 11" reruns, baby. Putting together a competent crew isn't easy.

Eventually, Vaccaro's criminal associates in the takeoff of the President Casino in Biloxi, Miss., in 1993 focused on their work long enough to relieve the gambling hall's blackjack tables of $500,000 before the scheme unraveled and resulted in a federal criminal indictment. Some took a plea, others took flight. Nothing if not dedicated to his trade, Vaccaro took another fall.

John Joseph Vaccaro Jr., a military veteran, roofing contractor and longtime member of Nevada's casino "Black Book," died Nov. 16 after a brief illness. He was 75.

Although his criminal record stretched back to 1971, he landed high on the government's radar in 1983 as the leader of what was then the biggest slot machine-rigging caper in Nevada history. In all, eight people manipulated more than 100 slot jackpots at casinos throughout Nevada and racked up more than $8 million before being caught. One jackpot at Harrah's Lake Tahoe alone paid $1.7 million. The first MGM Grand in Reno lost more than $1 million. The crew also scored at the Castaways, Barbary Coast, Bingo Palace (now Palace Station) and Holiday Casino in Las Vegas.

Read the whole story

Calif. is still cleaning up drug rehab system

By Christina Jewett, Reveal

California prosecutors are brokering plea deals in more than 11 criminal cases as health leaders overhaul the state's drug rehabilitation care more than two years after a Center for Investigative Reporting and CNN investigation into the system in Southern California.

Rehab Racket found that drug rehab counselors fabricated accounts of therapy sessions and diagnosed teens with addictions they didn't have. Rehab operators bribed vulnerable people with cash and cigarettes to attend taxpayer-funded drug rehabilitation sessions.

The Center for Investigative Reporting teamed with CNN to expose fraud in California's taxpayer-funded drug and alcohol counseling program.

Top state officials repeatedly declined to grant an interview over the findings. But after weeks of requests, the Department of Health Care Services jumped into action. Authorities dispatched audit "strike teams" to Drug Medi-Cal rehabilitation facilities throughout California and eventually cut off funding to more than 200 clinic sites. Auditors forwarded their findings to the state Department of Justice, leading to 11 people being charged and nine convicted.

One doctor who was a focus of the series is still fighting for his right to continue billing the Medi-Cal program. Howard Oliver oversaw care at 19 Los Angeles-area drug rehab clinics – often without seeing clients in person. After the news series, the state began a long process to ban Oliver, which the doctor is appealing.

Additionally, authorities in Southern California have begun putting promised changes in place to overhaul their systems for providing drug rehabilitation for the needy. In August, federal officials approved the five-year statewide pilot project – which already has taken effect in the Bay Area.

Richard Rawson, co-director of the UCLA Integrated Substance Abuse Programs, said that in 2007, his team wrote the basics for the plan, which provides a wide range of evidence-based services for recovering addicts.

Physician Howard Oliver was featured in the original Rehab Racket investigation. Since it aired, the state has banned him from billing the Medi-Cal program.Credit: CNN

Rawson credits the CIR/CNN series – as well as new options to revamp substance abuse care under President Obama’s health care law – with getting the new plan set for implementation in the coming months.

“(Rehab Racket) was kind of like a slap across the face … which meant that Sacramento couldn’t go on ignoring this,” Rawson said last week. “It has resulted in them putting together what I think is a really good plan.”

Under the new system, clients will have access to intervention services built into primary health care, up to 90 days of residential care, specialized drug withdrawal treatment and doctor consultations.

The system is being implemented now in Southern California and will be launched in participating counties throughout the state. It will have several layers of accountability reviews on the state and county levels, said Marlies Perez, deputy director of the Department of Health Care Services' Substance Use Disorder Compliance Division.

"We want to be sure it's done right," she said. "We learned a lot here in California and want to make sure we have taken those lessons and built the best system for our beneficiaries."

The Rehab Racket series focused on several service providers who were arrested shortly before or after the stories ran. They include George Ilouno, who collected more than $1 million in Medi-Cal payments even though he was banned from billing the program. Clients at Ilouno's Long Beach rehab center said they were paid to show up, and counselors said they were urged to forge therapy notes.

Federal authorities also arrested the medical director and 19 staff members of Atlantic Recovery Services, alleging that they perpetrated a $50 million fraud by falsely diagnosing teens with addictions or documenting services that weren't provided.

A second wave of state Department of Justice arrests began in January and continued through June. During that time, authorities charged 11 people with participating in scams to bilk California's drug rehabilitation system.

The recent arrests include the proprietors of Able Family Support, a rehab center that claimed to see 179 clients on a day in April 2013 when CIR and CNN reporters were counting clients entering the building. The total counted: no more than 30.

The news reports featured an interview with Able Family's executive director Alexander Ferdman, who was one of two program leaders charged in January with grand theft, identity theft and presenting false Medi-Cal and insurance claims. He pleaded guilty to grand theft in September and was sentenced to five years' probation. Ferdman did not return a call to his cellphone seeking comment.

In June, the former operator and medical director of Southland Outpatient Recovery were charged with grand theft, insurance fraud and Medi-Cal fraud. Court records say the state's audit team found that bills for rehab were submitted in the names of children who had no addictions. One young woman told investigators that she attended four sessions at the center, but 53 sessions were billed in her name.

Alexander Ferdman pleaded guilty to grand theft in September after The Center for Investigative Reporting and CNN exposed billing inconsistencies at his Panorama City drug rehabilitation clinic.Credit: CNN
Southland's operator, Sunday Okoro, and its medical director, Dr. Marvin White Jr., are accused of collecting $1.4 million in unearned government payments. They have pleaded not guilty. Okoro did not respond to calls for comment, and White referred to his attorney, who declined to comment.

Oliver, the doctor who was the focus of the CIR and CNN coverage, is waiting to find out if he will be banned from billing the Medi-Cal program statewide.

CIR and CNN examined Oliver's track record, noting that he held a leadership role at 19 Drug Medi-Cal counseling sites. In an interview with CIR, he conceded that he signed paperwork for rehab clients without meeting them and may have signed off on sham cases. His job, he maintained, was not to be a policeman.

State officials took a closer look at Oliver, records show. After reviewing the files of 30 of his rehab clients, the state filed an accusation seeking the ban in January 2014. The

10 counts against Oliver included failure to provide medical direction, false establishment of medical necessity for rehab services and substandard services.

Oliver fought the case at a June 2014 administrative hearing. An administrative law judge affirmed nine out of the 10 counts against Oliver, saying each was grounds for indefinite suspension from the Medi-Cal program. The judge concluded that Oliver was "rubber stamping" paperwork without making thoughtful medical judgments.

Oliver said in an interview Nov. 2 that the state's case against him was unfair and an example of bullying by the government. He said the state's experts were not familiar with the Drug Medi-Cal program.

"They didn't have any experts whatsoever," he said. "They called them that. I can call myself an astronaut, too."

Oliver appealed the administrative court decision, telling Sacramento County Superior Court that he was "wrongly suspended" in a case rife with procedural errors. Last month, the judge filed a tentative ruling reversing some of the administrative law judge's findings related to Oliver's client-assessment practices.

The judge is expected to finalize his decision by January. For now, Oliver remains suspended from billing the Medi-Cal program.

Prescribed fires to be set

throughout Tahoe

North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, the Nevada Division of Forestry and the U.S. Forest Service will continue widespread prescribed fire operations beginning the week of Nov. 30.

Operations may take place on urban lots on the west side of Incline Village, in Carnelian Bay, Kings Beach, off Fairway Drive near Tahoe City, off Elizabeth Drive north of Tahoma, off South Upper Truckee Road near Meyers, off F Street and Ski Run Boulevard in South Lake Tahoe, and in Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park north of Spooner Lake. Operations will continue over the next several weeks as weather and conditions allow.

The Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team will give as much advance notice as possible before burning, but some operations may be conducted on short notice.

Smoke from prescribed fire operations is normal and may continue for several days after an ignition depending on the project size and environmental conditions.

Before prescribed fire operations are conducted, agencies post road signs around areas affected by prescribed fire, send email notifications and update the local fire information line at 530.543.2816.

Reno man dies in Kingsbury Grade crash

A Reno man died Wednesday night in a single-vehicle accident on Kingsbury Grade.

The 52-year-old was driving west about four miles from Foothill Road at 5pm Nov. 25 when the accident occurred.

“He went into the mountain and crashed the Budget rent-a-truck,” Nevada Highway Patrolman Dan Lopez told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He said a medical issue may have led to the crash. There were also chain controls at the time. It has not been determined if weather was a factor.

On Thanksgiving Day the driver in a rollover accident on westbound Spooner Summit walked away without injuries. Lopez said the driver lost control in the slushy conditions.

“Everyone needs to drive slow and take extra time because of the winter weather,” Lopez said.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Money, clout on the line for Calif. teachers union

By Laurel Rosenhall, Calmatters

The California Teachers Association, one of Sacramento’s most powerful interests, is heading into an extraordinary year with decisions on the ballot, in the Capitol and in the courts holding the potential to impact its clout for many years to come.

Billions of dollars for schools will likely be at stake on the

2016 ballot as well as pivotal campaigns for state Legislature and a question about union pensions. Meanwhile, the Capitol is expecting a robust debate about how schools are evaluated and courts will hear two lawsuits challenging the teachers union.

“It’s a big year for education in California. To the extent we’re part of that, it’s a big year for us,” said union president Eric Heins.

CTA has become a force in Sacramento by pouring millions into influencing ballot measures and electing lawmakers, then millions more lobbying legislators after they take office. The union’s formidable political operation – spending about $200 million on campaigns and lobbying in the last 15 years – is funded by roughly 300,000 classroom teachers who pay approximately $1,000 each in annual union dues.

Read the whole story