

Lincoln's unemployment stats misleading, officials say

By Neil Feldman
Staff Reporter

Deceptive labor statistics could be painting an economic portrait of Lincoln that is too rosy, state and city officials say.

Although the city has proven its ability to weather national economic turbulence better than most U.S. cities, officials say some economic statistics may be skewed.

In its September 1994 issue, Money magazine said Lincoln's 2.4 percent unemployment rate was the lowest in the nation.

But that figure, Lincoln government officials say, is skewed because the U.S. Department of Labor, which dictates the process by which unemployment data is computed, does not differ from city to city.

Richard Gamet, spokesman for Lincoln's Department of Labor, said the way the U.S. Department of Labor figured economic statistics only worked for large cities, such as New York and Los Angeles.

Data for those cities, which have large economies with broad industrial bases and sprawling metropolitan areas, needs to be figured differently for cities like Lincoln, Gamet said.

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RICHARD GAMET

Spokesman for Lincoln's Department of Labor

Gamet, who is responsible for reporting Nebraska's monthly employment data, said the criteria for evaluating urban areas should vary depending upon the type of city.

"Lincoln has a diverse economy, so if one sector falters, others will pick up the slack," he said. "In a place like Detroit, however, the economy is virtually dependent on one industry."

Steve Frayser, Lincoln's Director of Eco-

nomics Development, said he disagreed with the notion that cities should be grouped categorically when compiling unemployment data. But, he said, the U.S. Department of Labor is not addressing the quality of life.

Many people with low incomes prefer to stay in Lincoln because of such things as a low crime rate, Frayser said.

The U.S. Department of Labor focuses only on economic data and doesn't incorporate crime rates, pollution levels, and other quality of life elements.

Cities like Lincoln often have a high quality of life and low unemployment rates, a correlation that, according to Frayser, should be addressed.

A rapidly expanding retail industry in Lincoln hasn't helped the accuracy of the data, either.

Julie Post, an official with Community Development Programming, said chain outfits like Wal-Mart and Kmart employed many people, but "most of the jobs created are at or near the minimum wage."

Frayser said, "Six percent of Lincoln's population is at or below the poverty line."

He said data indicated that poverty contin-

ued to rise.

Underemployment, where employees work at jobs below their qualifications, historically is high in Lincoln, and it is starting to increase.

Some officials fear that underemployment could cause the city's college graduates to seek employment elsewhere.

State Statistician Bill Dobbs said that while agriculture was not the sole base of Nebraska's economy, it was the most consistent sector of the state's economy over the past several years.

Not only have farmers' yields been above average, he said, but prices for soybeans and corn have remained at or above average since the beginning of the decade.

Furthermore, as more uses are discovered for corn, farmers can now reap benefits that were unheard of only 10 years ago.

"Ethanol and other corn by-products have been a big financial plus to the agriculture industry," Dobbs said.

Post, however, said that with the majority of Nebraska's population living in and around Lincoln and Omaha, evaluating the state's long-term economic situation was imperative.

"In Lincoln and Omaha," she said, "there is an increasing gap between the upperclass and the lowerclass, and this is a serious issue."

Bill would echo federal law in child-labor treatment

By John Fulwider
Staff Reporter

A bill allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to perform certain hazardous work would put Nebraska in line with federal child-labor laws, proponents of LB555 said Monday.

LB555, introduced by Sen. Chris Beutler of Lincoln, echoes existing federal law that allows 16- and 17-year-old apprentices and students to do work otherwise considered too dangerous for them, Beutler and 10 other proponents said. One person spoke in opposition to the bill before the Business and Finance Commit-

tee.

Beutler said after the hearing that he introduced the bill to educate people about a federal law on child-labor requirements for non-agricultural jobs.

"We're trying to reassure employers that they can participate in these kinds of (work-study) programs without fear of violation of law," he said.

Dennis Van Horn of Lincoln Public Schools said passage of the bill would help LPS's "school to work" program better prepare students for challenging and high-paying jobs that may be considered dangerous.

Sheila Barnes of First National Bank of Omaha said giving students hands-on-experience in their fields of interest was important, whether or not the work was hazardous. Students would not be limited by law to certain occupations, she said, if the bill was approved.

"How are the kids going to learn if you don't give them the opportunity?" she asked.

Ron Leifert, owner of Leifert Construction, also said the bill would give students the opportunity to be involved in what interests them.

"(This is an) opportunity for stu-

dents to make selections about their education earlier," he said.

The one person who spoke in opposition to the bill questioned a provision that says hazardous work done must be "intermittent and for short periods of time."

Beutler said it would be up to federal officials to come up with details.

Beutler also said the bill did not expand the work minors were allowed to do, because federal law allowed them to perform certain hazardous work.

The bill allows the same exemptions as federal from child-labor laws for the following types of hazardous work: power-driven woodworking machinery, power-driven metal forming, punching and shearing machines, meatpacking, paper products machines, circular and band saws and roofing and excavation operations.

According to the bill, student workers must be enrolled in a vocational training program approved by the Nebraska Department of Education, such as Lincoln Public Schools' "school to work" program, to be allowed to perform the hazardous work.

Speaker employs humor while teaching safe sex

By Brian Jensen
Staff Reporter

Jonathan Richmond uses humor to talk about a very serious subject... sexual responsibility.

The director of the Office of Health and Safety for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gave a speech Monday at the Nebraska Union entitled "45 Minutes That Could Save Your Life." His visit coincides with National Condom Week.

In a humorous atmosphere, Richmond spoke on three issues: sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and the social implications of having unprotected sex. Throughout the program, Richmond stressed how men and women both needed to take responsibility for their actions.

"I don't want people to think of this as a Monday evening meeting, but rather a reason to turn around and teach others about responsibility," Richmond said.

"One out of every 250 people are HIV positive," he said. "That number affects every college campus, including UNL."

Richmond cited a study of the University of Florida that said 98 percent of women who had sex did not talk about it with their partners before it happened.

"The problem with people these days is that we don't talk about sex with our partners," Richmond said.

Richmond started working to develop AIDS training ten years ago. Five years later he started to volunteer speaking to community groups. He continues to do that today.

"I do this on my own time. Hopefully in three years I can come back and discover that HIV cases are going down," Richmond said.

His visit to UNL was sponsored by the Chi Phi National Fraternity, Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority and the University Health Center.

these people senator?" Daub asked.

"Tremendously, and they are going to love it," Hall said, followed by laughter and applause.

Round Two. Mayor Mike Johanns of Lincoln said he opposed the bills because he did not want to be known as the mayor that brought casinos to Lincoln.

Johanns said his decision to oppose the bill was made difficult by horse racing at State Fair Park, which he admitted needed a boost.

When Keno was first approved, Johanns said he supported the added money to the city's coffers. However, Johanns said, there was never enough money and casinos could not change that.

Johanns said he had to oppose the casinos in the Legislature because if he were to oppose it in front of the voters, it would be like standing in front of a freight train.

"There is big, big money involved in this," he said. He said once casinos were in place, they wouldn't go away.

Hall countered, asking why casinos weren't already in Nebraska. Johanns did not answer.

More than 25 people testified on the bills.

Gambling

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casinos.

Daub also said that people in Hall's district, home to some of Omaha's poorest citizens, would be the hardest hit by the casinos.

Hall countered, saying that people would still go to the casinos, regardless of whether they were in Omaha or not.

"You think they won't find a way across the bridge? Come on," he said.

Hall and Daub raised their voices several times, trying to be heard over each other.

One of the exchanges brought applause from the audience, which was jokingly rebuked by Schellpeper of Stanton.

Hall accused Daub of forcing restaurant and bar business out of Omaha by opposing the bill.

"Are you saying that the only business in Omaha is restaurants?" Daub asked.

"Yes, it is a big business," Hall replied.

"How much are you going to tax

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