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We shouldn't be funding the habits of drug and alcohol abusers

By William S. Cohen

A recovering alcoholic from California, getting his life together after serving a prison term for drunk driving, and appeared headed for better things.

He learned, however, that his previous alcoholism could make him eligible for benefits under the Social Security disability program. He applied and eventually received a check from the government for \$49,000 plus monthly benefits.

Elated at his good fortune, he dropped out of college, started drinking heavily and was arrested again for drunk driving. Fearing further imprisonment, he fled the state when he was released on bond, lived in a mobile home and continued drinking. Soon thereafter he died of kidney failure at the age of 44.

"Government compassion killed Sen. William S. Cohen is a Republican from Maine.

this man," said the relative who told me the story. "It was a classic demonstration of how throwing money at a problem only makes it worse."

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. A year-long investigation by my staff on the Special Committee on Aging and the General Accounting Office determined that hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funds are being used to feed the addictions of drug addicts and alcoholics.

Last year, the government paid \$1.4 billion to 250,000 drug addicts and alcoholics under the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. Of those, 78,000 — less than one-third — were subject to any controls or monitoring of funds they received, and less than 10 percent of this group was known to be in treatment.

This federal revenue sharing for drug addicts and alcoholics represents a tremendous disservice for those it is supposed to help. Instead of receiving the treatment they need, substance abusers are being

paid to perpetuate their addictions, and the taxpayers are footing the bill.

To deal with this problem I have introduced legislation, passed by the Senate earlier this month, that would take the cash out of the hands of addicts and alcoholics and ensure that they receive treatment.

I believe it is crucial that the House pass this legislation soon so we can stop the flow of money to those who are simply shooting up or drinking away their government benefits.

My bill: ■ Discontinues SSI and SSDI cash payments to alcoholics and addicts. Instead, benefits would go to an institution or approved agency to manage the funds.

The effects of such changes would be dramatic. For example, a letter I received from a person who has been homeless on the streets of Washington for two decades described vividly the binges that are prompted by the arrival of a disability check.

"I have seen my 'class' members get drunk and high each month and

slay that way until their cash runs out," she wrote. "It is sad to see a woman who is okay by the end of one month and drunk again at the beginning of the next. These addicts get robbed and abused when in a stupor. They prostitute themselves. Easy money tends to make us weak."

■ Requires that lump-sum retroactive payments, like monthly cash benefits, go to community organizations or agencies that will hold the funds for the addict or alcoholic.

The change would deal with the problem highlighted by the \$49,000 payment to the California alcoholic. Determining benefit eligibility can take a year or more, resulting in some large retroactive payments to substance abusers. Binges among beneficiaries are commonplace, and some have even died of drug overdoses purchased with government funds.

■ Removes from the rolls those who profit from illegal activities, such as drug dealing, to sustain their habits. The staff investigation uncovered

cases where addicts were actively engaged in criminal activities such as drug dealing, armed robbery and burglary, and readily admitted such activities to the government when seeking benefits.

In one instance an SSI beneficiary said he obtained \$600 worth of heroin daily for up to three people and received about 1 1/2 grams of heroin a day, worth \$150, for himself. Incredibly, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California ruled recently that this activity was not enough to establish that the drug dealer could work, thereby allowing him and others like him to continue receiving benefits.

■ Requires better monitoring of these receiving benefits. Among addicts and alcoholics on the street, the disability programs are known as an easy source of cash, and the number of addicts and alcoholics in the SSI program has increased by 150 percent from 1989 to 1992.

But while the program has mushroomed, the Social Security Administration has not done enough to ensure that benefits are going for

their intended purpose. Through last year, the agency has established programs in only 18 states to monitor treatment requirements for substance abusers. The bill requires all states to have such an agency.

■ Sets up a strict review process for substance abusers. After one year, if an individual were still disabled but not receiving treatment, benefits would be suspended. Another review would take place after two years. Payments for disabilities based solely on substance abuse could not continue for more than three years.

The goal of this legislation is to stop federal payments from going into a needle or into a bottle and to provide tough penalties for those who defraud the system to receive benefits.

Its aim is to save taxpayer dollars and encourage rehabilitation for those who can and should recover from their addictions, rather than providing a lifelong — and life-threatening — source of cash for the demons that control their lives.

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123

Embassy Row

The Nigerian ambassador asked for it and got a litany of criticism, frustration and anger from his countrymen in the United States when they were asked for comments on Nigeria's attempt to return the country to civilian rule with a new constitution.

Ambassador Zubair Mahmud Kazaure invited dozens of Nigerians to his home in Chevy Chase last week for one in a series of dinners designed to seek the opinions of Nigerians living abroad.

"I am on a mission from the government to obtain the views on the constitutional conference being prepared by" the country's military rulers, Mr. Kazaure said.

It proved to be a mission impossible as many Nigerians stood before a microphone in the spotlight of a video camera, positioned to record their comments, and told the ambassador he was wasting their time.

"Each time we have a military government, we have a constitutional convention. Then we elect a government. Then we have another military government, and the process starts again," said one man who had offered written comments on a proposed constitution in 1986 only to find them ignored.

Another man demanded to know what role the military is really playing. He said he is "very skeptical and suspicious."

A third man said Nigerian governments routinely ignore laws that already exist.

"Our leaders need to follow the laws," he said. "A constitutional conference is a waste of time."

Mr. Kazaure tried to explain that Nigerians, themselves, are partly to blame for the crisis that began with the annulment of elections in June and the overthrow of an interim government.

He said the country "was very likely to [have fallen] into instability and chaos" before the military took over.

Warning against the ethnic divisions that have plagued Nigeria, he appealed to his audience "to eschew sectionalism and tribalism."

"It is not fair to blame the interim government or the military . . ." he said. "We have ourselves to blame."

State Department official Robin Raphel was supposed to go to India to prepare for a fence-mending trip by State's No. 2 man, Strobe Talbott, but she immediately ran into trouble yesterday with the Indian press, which has blamed her for much of the strained relations between New Delhi and Washington.

The Press Trust of India news agency said "arrogant" U.S. Embassy officials herded them out of the VIP lounge at New Delhi airport and blocked them from questioning Mrs. Raphel upon her arrival.

There was no immediate comment from the embassy.

Mrs. Raphel angered Indian officials last year after she was named assistant secretary of state for South Asia by appearing to question India's right to parts of Kashmir, which has been part of India since independence from Britain in 1947.

Mrs. Raphel has also criticized New Delhi's human rights record in dealing with a bloody, 4-year-old rebellion in Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority region in Hindu India.

U.S.-India relations have also been strained because the Clinton administration has failed for more than a year to appoint an ambassador to New Delhi. The Indian government has perceived the long delay as an insult to a country that has close political and economic ties with the United States.

The purpose of Mrs. Raphel's trip is to pave the way for Mr. Talbott, who will make his first foreign trip as deputy secretary of state next month.

An Israeli reporter and an Arab-American leader agreed on one issue in a debate yesterday on a radio talk show. Both blamed President Clinton for not showing more leadership on foreign affairs.

Speaking on WAMU's "Diane Rehm Show," Akiva Elder of the newspaper Ha'aretz and Khalil Jahshan, director of the National Arab-American Association, said Mr. Clinton is spending too much time on domestic affairs. They said his lack of attention on world issues is threatening the resumption of Middle East peace talks.

They also criticized Secretary of State Warren Christopher, saying the United States needs a more activist foreign minister.

124