

Government should get out of the charity business

By Wayne Hoffman

Entering a season of charitable giving, a story a few days ago on NBC News caught my eye. It was about a woman named Mary Donnelly, an 83-year-old nurse who "cares for her neighbors the way people used to in this country," said news anchor Brian Williams. On Block Island, Rhode Island, Mary established a charitable foundation in 1979, and has been answering calls for help from people ever since. She responds to appeals for assistance paying electricity bills and mortgages, money to build wheelchair ramps and buy food. Mary's August fundraiser is considered the island's "the social event of the season" and provides the revenue to send out the support checks she provides.

But Williams' intro for the story perhaps unwittingly leaves an unanswered question: Why do people no longer care for their neighbors the way they used to? The answer is fairly simple, actually: The government has taken on the role of caregiver. Neighbors, churches, families and charities that used to be providers of charitable needs have been supplanted by government agencies. In fact, government agencies high-five each other and give awards for signing people up for government programs.

In 2010, Idaho got a \$1.2 million bonus from the federal government for efficiently signing people up for Food Stamps. Idaho has had no shortage of people signing up for the federal food aid program. About 104,000 people were on government help in 2008. This summer, some 235,000 were enrolled in government assistance. Based on Idaho's bonus payment, I suppose the government views this as "an improvement." Yay, us.

But take a close look at the charity our government dispenses, and how well those programs work. The government's "charity" in Appalachia is directly responsible for generations of families remaining impoverished. Look at the government's charity in our inner cities, where minority families are encouraged to be single-parent households so they can receive a government handout. And take a look at our the government's charity through unemployment benefits, which helped keep people out of work for months on end. So perverse is this form of charity, that in Canyon County, where unemployment is in the double-digits, growers couldn't find enough people to go pick the fruit from trees; growers were told getting a job in the fruit harvest would've caused unemployed workers to lose their benefit checks.

Government gets in the charity business because politicians feel they need to "do something" to help out, and armed with the power of taxation, politicians collect money from people, including the poor, and redistribute it into programs that largely fail to work. Then, seeing those failed programs, the bureaucrats lobby for more money (under the guise of making the program better, but really to sustain their jobs and build their kingdoms), while the politician supports those expansions as a sign to constituents of how much he or she cares about the downtrodden.

But care can be expressed by getting people out of poverty, not onto perpetual government assistance. It costs some \$9 million to run Idaho's food stamp program. And Idaho loses another \$18 million in revenue by selling food that is tax exempt because it

was purchased with food stamps. Somewhere in all that money, we should find a way to incentivize people to get off government welfare and break free of poverty.

If Idaho politicians really care about Idahoans, they need to dismantle broken government assistance programs. Lawmakers need to incentivize the charitable giving that Brian Williams talked about, the charitable giving that has been suppressed by government.