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VERMONT

State's artistic heritage fuels unique gift ideas. Find the insert inside.



GREEN MOUNTAIN

THE TURKEY LESS TRAVELED

Think locally raised turkeys are the most environmentally friendly bird you can serve this Thanksgiving because there's so little distance between farm and plate — a concept called food miles? Think again. But that might not be all the "food miles" concept has going for it.

Find this story and more in Section D

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INSIDE TODAY

SPORTS



NEW WRINKLE IN HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS: Vermont public schools are in the midst of a major enrollment decline — overall student population has dropped nearly 15 percent since 1997 — and it's starting to create issues with high school athletics. With sports participation dropping at a even greater percentage, high schools have had to make tough decisions regarding its sports programs. Given those dwindling numbers, a wave of cooperative teams — two schools joining together for one sport — are popping up across the state. Read about its effect in Alex Abrami's story on **Page 1B**.

ARTS

AN ARTIST AT WAR: Iraq war veteran's work questions American militarism while quelling personal demons. Susan Green writes about how Jon Turner shared his thoughts and experiences of war on **Page 1D**.

VERMONT

MEDICAL TRAGEDY: Misplaced medical test set in motion treatment that ended in stroke and the death of a Saxtons River woman, and has now prompted a wrongful-death lawsuit. See Sam Hemingway's report on **Page 1C**.

Left on hold

State gives Vermonters seeking aid waiting times exceeding 1,000 minutes

By Nancy Remsen
Free Press Staff Writer

When Brenda Barsalou saw her aunt's monthly fuel payments jump by \$50 a month this fall, she persuaded her 86-year-old relative to seek financial assistance for the first time.

The application was daunting enough at 18 pages, Barsalou said, but not nearly as frustrating as what followed. She spent hours on hold trying to make a required contact for her aunt with a state interviewer. She couldn't get through before the deadline for the interview passed.

Barsalou and her aunt — and many other Vermonters — got snagged in the bumpy rollout of a modernization initiative at the Department for Children and Families that at its worst saddled some clients with estimated telephone wait times of hundreds of minutes.

Using electronic technology and centralized management, the department's \$3 million modernization project is intended to improve service to Vermonters who are seeking financial assistance with food, fuel and health care. It would eliminate the need for many trips to regional offices by allowing automated telephone inquiries, telephone interviews and Internet applications.

For a host of reasons — glitches in software, delays in system development, shrunken staffing and an avalanche of applications — this modernization effort so far has created almost as many problems as it has solved.

Vermonters who have been stuck on hold so long they give up or who sit weeks in limbo awaiting action on their applications all are people who are struggling financially. They come to the Department for Children and Families for help to meet basic needs such as putting food on the table or fuel in a furnace.

Meeting basic needs

The Department for Children and Families is modernizing the way it provides an array of basic services — food, fuel, health care — to Vermonters. It now offers information and applications by telephone and online.

■ **TELEPHONE:** Call the Benefits Service Center at 800-479-6151.

■ **ONLINE:** Go to www.mybenefits.vt.gov

Growing caseload

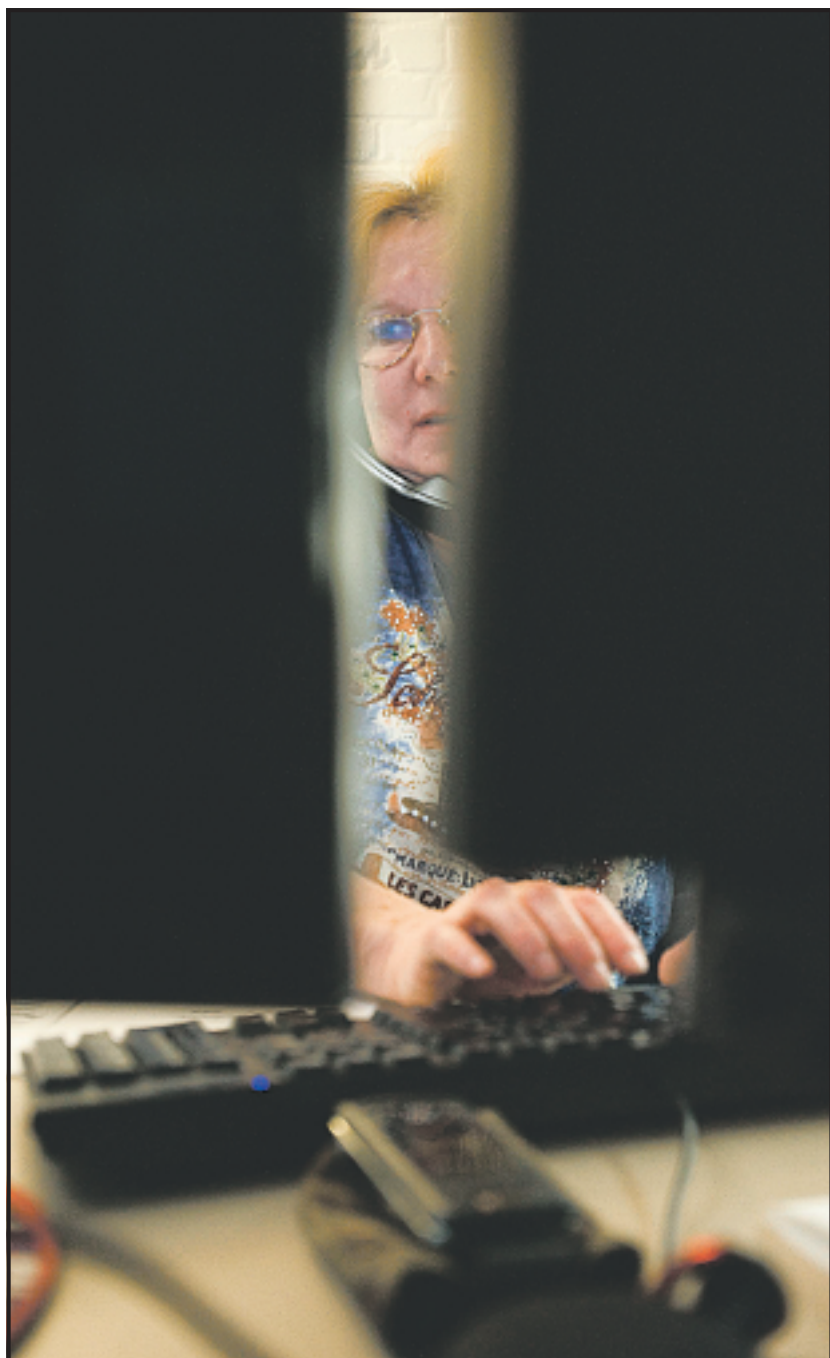
The economic downturn has been a big factor in the increase in Vermonters receiving benefits to help them meet their basic needs. Here's caseload data for two of the department's basic need programs:

■ **3SQUARESVT:** The number of Vermonters benefiting from the 3SquaresVt food aid program, formerly known as Food Stamps, doubled in five years. There was an average of 44,783 individuals in the program in fiscal year 2005. This year, the average has been 87,010.

■ **FUEL ASSISTANCE:** As of a week ago, 19,775 households were receiving fuel assistance benefits, up from 15,887 by the same date a year ago. Vermonters continue to enroll. The final tally is projected at 27,600, compared with 20,400 a year ago.

Advocates don't know how many people have been affected by snags when they apply for benefits, but they do know that nearly one-in-seven Vermonters is short of food. A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture survey found the percentage of Vermont households without sufficient food had

See **CALLS**, 4A



GLENN RUSSELL, Free Press

Coleen Bean fields calls at the Agency of Human Services Benefits Service Center in Waterbury on Wednesday.

Teachers' degree bonuses may be endangered

By Donna Gordon Blankinship
The Associated Press

SEATTLE — Every year, American schools pay more than \$8.6 billion in bonuses to teachers with master's degrees, even though the idea that a higher degree makes a teacher more effective has been mostly debunked.

Despite more than a decade of research showing the money has little impact on student achievement, state lawmakers and other officials have been reluctant to tackle this popular way for teachers to earn more money.

That could soon change, as lo-

Economic downturn has states rethinking process

cal school districts around the country grapple with shrinking budgets.

Just this week, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the economy has given the nation an opportunity to make dramatic improvements in the productivity of its education system and to do more of what works and less of what doesn't.

Duncan told the American Enterprise Institute on Wednesday

that master's degree bonuses are an example of spending money on something that doesn't work.

Friday, billionaire Bill Gates took aim at school budgets and the master's degree bonus.

"My own state of Washington has an average salary bump of nearly \$11,000 for a master's degree — and more than half of our teachers get it. That's more than \$300 million every year that doesn't help kids," he said.

"And that's one state," said Gates, the co-chairman of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, at a speech Friday in Louisville to the Council of Chief State School Officers. Gates also took aim at pensions and seniority.

"Of course, restructuring pay systems is like kicking a beehive," he said.

As of 2008, 48 percent of public school teachers in this country had a master's degree or above, and

nearly every one of them got a bonus of between \$1,423 and \$10,777 each year, according to research from the University of Washington.

Most school budgets have been tight for years, with districts trimming everything from printing to teachers.

Michael Podgursky, an economics professor at the University of Missouri, said the economic downturn may force payroll reform in some places where the political will has been lacking. And they

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WEATHER

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Turning sunny. **Page 10A**

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