THE JOURNAL GAZETTE
PERSPECTIVE
www.journalgazette.net SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2024 7A

EDITORIAL

Morales again misdirects his sense of duty

If we apply the English proverb "Start as you mean to go" to Diego Morales, Hoosiers shouldn't be surprised about recent revelations that he awarded millions of taxpayer dollars in no-bid contracts to companies that made substantial campaign contributions.

Disgusted but not surprised.

During his 2022 campaign for Indiana secretary of state, Morales faced scrutiny for using campaign funds to buy an SUV and for inflating his military experience. Yet his zealous MAGA allegiance, paired with a denial of his previous election denial, won him the GOP nomination over the more qualified incumbent, Holli Sullivan. He then in November defeated Democrat Destiny Wells, who has exhibited far more intellect and integrity.


Morales

Once again, Morales provides a stark reminder of why Hoosiers, regardless of political affiliation, should be concerned about the scrupulousness of his office. The no-bid contract fiasco smacks of political favoritism and deeply undermines public trust. Julia Vaughn, executive director of Common Cause Indiana, did not mince words about the implications.

"Given the secretary of state's history of spending public money for questionable purposes – hiring family members in new positions, large bonuses, expensive luncheons for staff – these no-bid contracts do raise a concern," Vaughn told The Journal Gazette. "Suspicion is further heightened by the fact that these same companies made significant campaign contributions to the secretary of state at a time when he is not running for reelection. In my experience, it sure looks like pay-to-play."

Morales claimed time constraints justified avoiding the bidding process, but his reasoning fails under scrutiny, to which Vaughn asks, "What was the rush, exactly? And why did it conveniently benefit contributors to his campaign?"

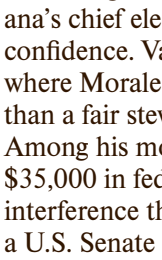
This is far from an isolated incident. Morales has a history of spending public funds in ways that invite skepticism. His decisions consistently seem to prioritize personal and political interests above all.

Adding to this pattern, Morales' behavior as Indiana's chief elections officer has further eroded public confidence. Vaughn has detailed numerous instances where Morales acted more like a partisan operative than a fair steward of Indiana's electoral system. Among his most egregious actions were wasting $35,000 in federal funds on a mailing about election interference that was available online, endorsing a U.S. Senate candidate from his taxpayer-funded office, and traveling to Hungary to participate in a blatantly partisan panel discussion.

Even more troubling is Morales' use of his position to promote divisive and misleading narratives about election security. His congressional testimony criticizes states that encourage voter registration, and his support for unnecessary federal legislation such as the SAVE Act prioritizes partisan talking points over meaningful reforms.

Indiana desperately needs leadership that fosters civic engagement. According to the Indiana Civic Health Index, the state ranked 50th in voter turnout in 2022. Morales stoked unfounded fears about election integrity instead of addressing this dismal ranking by promoting no-excuse absentee voting or same-day voter registration – proven methods to boost participation.

This failure of leadership reflects a deeper systemic problem: Indiana's governance lacks sufficient checks and balances. The state's "separation of powers ethos," as Vaughn describes it, limits legislative oversight of executive branch spending. Without stricter procurement laws or an independent oversight mechanism like the State Board of Accounts to review no-bid contracts, Hoosiers remain vulnerable to leaders who exploit public resources for personal or political gain.


Vaughn

Indiana deserves better. Hoosiers deserve a secretary of state who rises above politics to advocate for policies that expand voter access and strengthen public confidence. We need leadership that promotes transparency and accountability – not a public official who rewards donors and plays political games.

Diego Morales may have taken an oath to serve all Hoosiers, but his actions reveal where his priorities truly lie. Until structural reforms are enacted and voters demand better leadership, Indiana will remain at risk of governance that puts politics above public service.

Either the GOP will rein him in, or Hoosiers should send him packing in 2026.

And there was LIGHT

Illuminating Jewish traditions reinforces religions' connections

ELI FEDERMAN


Associated Press

Kylie Schmitter, held aloft by President Barack Obama, lights the menorah during a 2013 Hanukkah reception at the White House.

Hanukkah begins on Christmas this year, marking a rare coincidence of the Jewish and Christian holidays, which occur according to different calendars. The alignment invites reflection on how two traditions can inspire each other.

The Orthodox Jewish community I grew up in rejected Christmas lights as signs of unwanted assimilation. We lighted the menorahs in our windows and doorways for the holiday's eight nights, keeping the tradition simple and understated. Any more showy displays would have felt like crossing a line.


Eli Federman is a writer and private equity investor. He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.

Still, as a child, I secretly admired the glowing homes of my neighbors. But those lights weren't for us – or so I was taught.

Decades later, I stand in my cul-de-sac and stare at my neighbors' dazzling home, with warm, sparkling lights wrapped around the trees. They decorate their home for Christmas because it brings them joy – and, honestly, it brings joy to everyone who passes by.

Apart from menorahs and basic landscape lighting, most of the Jewish homes on the street stay dark during Hanukkah. We keep them that way out of habit, tradition and a lingering belief that holiday lights are "not Jewish."

My kids don't observe the rigid boundaries of my childhood, though. When we drive through the neighborhood, they're drawn to the lights like moths to a flame, pressing their faces against the car windows and pointing out their favorite houses.

"Why don't we have lights like that?" my 12-year-old, Rosa, asks, her voice full of wonder and betraying a hint of sadness.

I don't have a good answer. Why don't we?

Holiday lights have more than aesthetic benefits, signaling community and social connection. Lights can boost mood, reduce stress and create warmth, especially during the dark winter months. Holiday lights

Light, Page 12A

Troubling Development

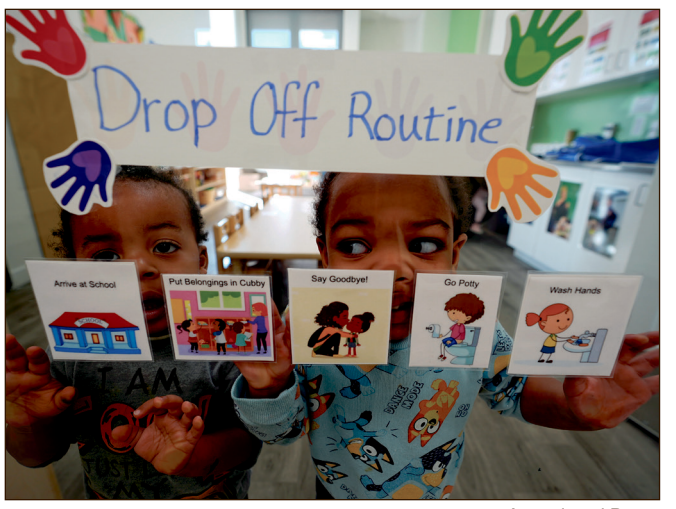
Reduced child care funding has implications for families and society

ALLIE SUTHERLAND

The Family and Social Services Administration recently announced reimplementation of a waitlist for new Child Care Development Fund applicants as a result of unprecedented demand and the tapering of federal funding.


Allie Sutherland is executive director of the Northeast Indiana Early Childhood Coalition.

This decision marks a significant setback for families across Indiana, as child care subsidies will now be even more limited. Families were already finding it nearly impossible to access and afford quality care. If funding is not maintained at the current level, the situation becomes even harder.



Associated Press

It is imperative to understand the profound impact this will have on families, children, providers and our community as a whole.

FSSA Director Dr. Daniel Rusyniak estimates that current funding will allow the state to serve about 50,000 children in the coming fiscal year – down from more than 70,000 currently receiving support. This means 20,000 fewer children will have access to the care they need.

These vouchers are critical for low-income working families earning less than 150% of the federal poverty level, about $45,000 annually for a family of four. Yet, according to Child Care Aware of America, the average cost of care for two children in Indiana is a staggering $23,157 per year.

The hearing also revealed that most families benefiting from the Child Care Development Fund program earn far less than the 150% threshold. For families already struggling, this waitlist will create near-impossible choices: pay out-of-pocket for unaffordable care, forgo employment, or place their children in potentially unsafe, low-quality care.

This is not just a crisis for families. It will have ripple effects across our entire community.

The Northeast Indiana Early Childhood Coalition, alongside Ambassador Enterprises and The Regional Chamber, commissioned a study in November 2022. It found that roughly 9,000 families in our region alone are impacted by the lack of affordable child care. This challenge will only deepen under the new waitlist system.

Child care, Page 12A