

Workers union joins fray on child welfare

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STATESMAN JOURNAL

Calls to improve Oregon's child welfare system grew louder Wednesday as one of the largest public employee unions released a report saying caseworkers are overburdened and the agency needs more staff.

The Service Employees International Union Local 503 represents about 2,000 child welfare staffers among its 55,000 Oregon workers, according to a union spokesman.

The report comes as top officials from the Department of Human Services are slated to present their budget plans to the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services. DHS Director Clyde Saiki kicked off the series Tuesday, giving an overview of the agency's status and briefly addressing its child welfare predicament.

"We have not invested enough in our staff and we need to fix that," Saiki told lawmakers in a Capitol hearing room. He said the internal staffing level was around 83 percent for child welfare.

Rep. Teresa Alonso Leon, D-Woodburn, said that staffing level was higher than what some of her constituents who work for DHS had seen. She requested that DHS Child Welfare Director Lena Alhusseini come prepared with numbers on how many more staff would be needed to meet foster child and parent needs.

"I need to know what it is that we need," Alonso Leon said. Alhusseini will present on her arm of the agency on April 3 and 4 in Salem.

Public records show the child welfare program accounts for \$1.05 billion or 9 percent of DHS' budget under Gov. Kate



The Oregon Department of Human Services building in Salem.

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Brown's proposed 2017-2019 budget.

DHS officials have cited understaffing and high turnover as issues.

The union report only adds another layer of scrutiny to DHS. Even after an independent review of the agency called by Gov. Kate Brown wrapped up last September, Secretary of State Dennis Richardson said this month his office is beginning an audit of Oregon's foster care system.

The union in its report said more than half of respondents to a survey conducted last August said their caseloads ex-

ceed the recommended allotment. The survey, which was qualitative in nature, included 63 interviews with child welfare workers around the state. Workers were asked: "How has lack of funding, staffing, training or support for child welfare services impacted you or your work?"

The union said 57 percent of respondents talked about the excess of cases. Barbara Walsh, an office specialist with the DHS Child Welfare Office in Medford, said caseloads have doubled in recent years and staffers are having a hard

time keeping up.

"The caseloads are so heavy that we're losing caseworkers," she said.

Director Saiki on Tuesday said the agency must ensure "not just a placement for a child, but the most appropriate placement for a child," but that may be a hard ask at a time when there appears to be a deficit of foster homes.

A recent estimate suggested there were around 8,000 children in Oregon's foster care system. The number of certified foster homes has slid in recent years. A DHS spokeswoman in January said there were 3,847 certified foster homes in 2015, down from 4,673 in 2010.

Saiki said the agency needs to work to reduce the number of children in foster care. "We have one of the highest rates of kids in foster care in the nation, and we really need to address that," he said.

His remark spurred a question from Rep. Knute Buehler, R-Bend: "Why do you think we have such a high rate of kids in foster care?"

Saiki responded: "We're digging into that, but I think one factor is again, we're a very risk-averse agency, and so if there's any even an inkling that there could be an issue, we default to the position of taking the child into care as opposed to saying, 'What can we do to ensure the child's safety and have the child remain in their home?'"

He called it "kind of a cultural issue that we need to change," but acknowledged that the choice for caseworkers is "one of the hardest decisions they have to make."

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PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Oregon state park ranger Travis Korbe points out an area where whales might be spotted from the Cape Trail at Cape Lookout State Park south of Tillamook.

As crowds rise, Oregon's state parks seek rangers, improvement funding

ZACH URNESS
STATESMAN JOURNAL

The number of people visiting Oregon's state parks has skyrocketed during the past decade, hitting a record 51 million visits in 2016.

But the number of park rangers hasn't changed much during the same period, officials said, leading to challenges in keeping parks clean and facilities up to date.

To remedy that, parks officials want to hire an additional 42 rangers and put an extra \$1 million into the budget for maintaining and improving parks during the coming two years.

Money would come from the park's main funding sources — the Oregon Lottery and fees from visitors and RV registration. Parks do not receive funding from the taxpayer general fund.

"We're in a situation right now where our user fees are up and our lottery funds are stable," Oregon Parks and Recreation Director Lisa Sumption said. "We have the budget to cover this without taking something else away. This is a good time to add staff to ensure visitors are having the best possible experience."

The total amount OPRD is requesting for 2017-19 is \$219.5 million. That's up from a \$201.9 million in 2015-17 and \$181.5 million in 2011-13.

The need for more rangers is reflected in the numbers, officials said. Visitation is up 16 percent overall and 45 percent in the off-season — when parks doesn't have access to seasonal staff — since 2007. But the number of full-time employees is only up 2.5 percent in the

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department expenditures per biennium

- 2005-07: \$187 million
- 2007-09: \$203.9 million
- 2009-11: \$187 million
- 2011-13: \$181.5 million
- 2013-15: \$189.6 million
- 2015-17: \$201.9 million (budgeted)
- 2017-19: \$219.5 million requested

Money comes from the Oregon Lottery (47 percent), visitor fees/RV fees (47 percent) and federal grants (6 percent).

same period. "If you were running a business and it was up 45 percent you'd put more resources into it," Sumption said. "We have to make sure we have enough people on the ground to support the visitors."

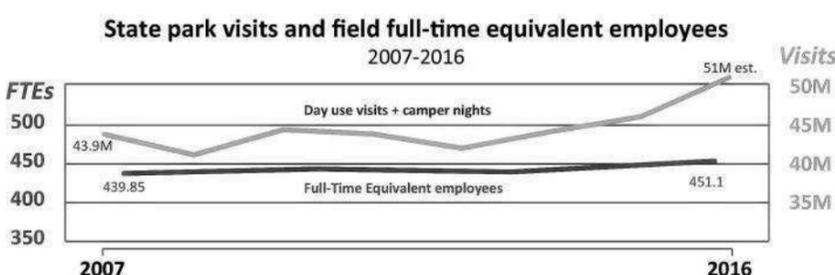
OPRD scaled back the number of new parks it has opened since 2013. The agency opened nine new parks from 2004 to 2013.

Since that time, only one new park is planned, Sitka Sedge Natural Area, which should open this summer. "We hit pause on new land acquisitions to ensure we were taking care of the system we already had," Sumption said.

"This is a tough call, asking for staff given the overall health of the Oregon budget," OPRD spokesman Chris Havel said. "But we can't put it off any more."



Robyn Orr hikes with her 5-month-old daughter, Lucy, on the Cape Trail at Cape Lookout State Park on the Oregon Coast south of Tillamook.



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