

# Homeless

Continued from Page 1A

“She was a trooper,” Walker said. “I don’t even think she let me know how — bad it was.”

Koehmsted is one of an unknown number of people who have died in Oregon while struggling with homelessness in the last year.

Neither the state nor Marion County track homeless deaths, leaving many of the dead forgotten to everyone but the few who may have known them.

## Are deaths rising?

Jimmy Jones, executive director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, said it feels like homeless deaths in the Salem area have skyrocketed in 2020 and 2021.

There was Koehmstedt, dead at 36. And there was a chronically homeless man who, already having lost his foot and leg to infection, had the infection spread to his other foot and leg. After initially refusing, he promised his advocate he’d go to the hospital if he could first spend the night in a motel room and have a milkshake. By morning, he was dead.

Others have died from being struck by vehicles or on the receiving end of violence.

Jones said his agency has lost about 30 homeless clients in the past 14 months. It feels like it has almost doubled from previous years, he said.

But really, he can only guess — because homeless deaths are not tracked in Oregon.

“Those are the ones I know about,” Jones said. “It’s all speculation.”

Other than unofficial counts and area-specific studies, there’s no way to know how many people are dying while homeless, how they are dying and what could have been done to prevent their deaths.

A proposed bill in the Oregon Legislature seeks to change that.

Senate Bill 850 would require death reports to list the housing status of the deceased, allowing the public and advocates to determine exactly how many people with the designation “domicile unknown” are dying throughout Oregon each year.

Jones said these deaths cannot be prevented unless more is known about them.

“With one single goal in mind — keeping people from dying outside,” he said. “That cannot be done without better information.”

## Love at first sight

Although they weren’t legally married, Walker calls Koehmstedt his wife.

They were together for 19 years. He said the minute he spotted Koehmstedt at a party, he loved her immediately.

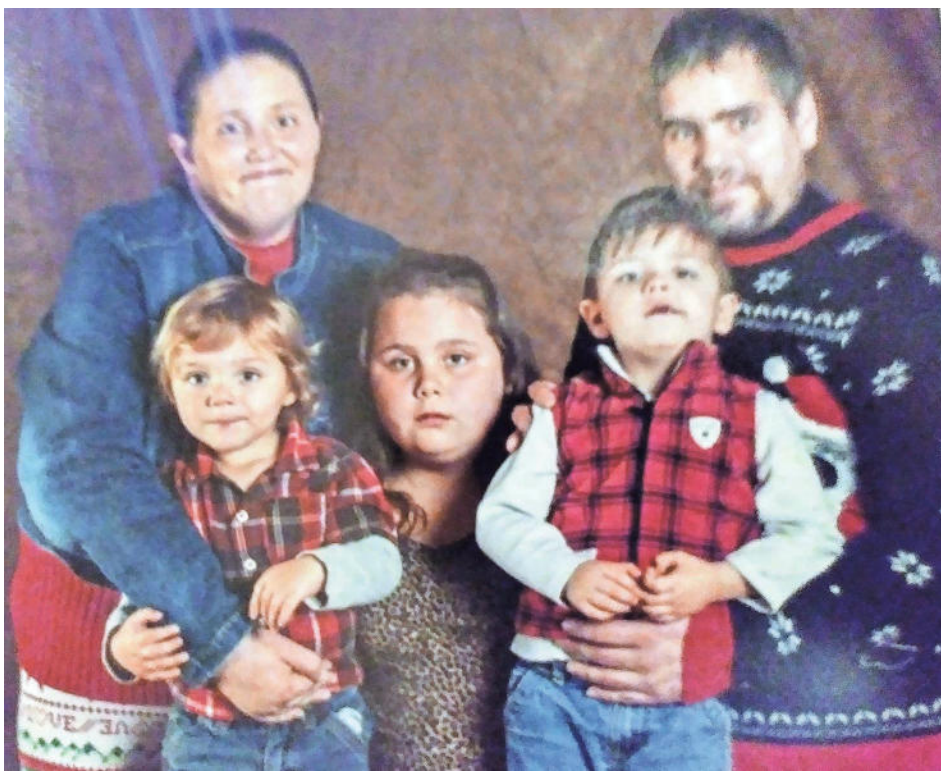
The pair was soon inseparable. Walker said Koehmstedt grew up in a stable family on the Oregon Coast. She worked as a receptionist and always put their 13-year-old daughter and 5- and 8-year-old sons first, helping with homework and making life fun.

“She was the best mom,” Walker said. “She put on a smile even though she was in pain, to make sure the kids had a good day.”

Both Walker and Koehmstedt had long struggled with addiction. Walker said they worked hard to stay clean and put their children first.

A missed rent payment and late charges at their apartment near Woodmansee Park led to their eviction notice on Christmas Eve 2019.

Walker said they entered into a payment plan, but the missing last payment, which a family member mailed



Jill Koehmstedt and her family. Koehmstedt, 36, died after experiencing homelessness in Salem. JOSH WALKER/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

but was not received in time, led to the Marion County Sheriff’s Office arriving at the apartment in February 2020 and telling them they had 20 minutes to get their belongings and leave.

The family of five was able to find shelter for a while — staying with friends, using donations for motel stays and even staying in a summer camp in Gates left shuttered by the pandemic — as they looked for apartments.

But with a recent eviction on their record, Walker said nobody would rent to them, even when he offered three times the security deposit.

They set up an eight-person tent on the outskirts of Cascades Gateway Park, hoping to avoid the dangers rumored to be deeper inside the park. They walked to Walmart to buy food.

“We were just trying to survive,” Walker said.

## Data not tracked

Currently, the Oregon Health Authority does not analyze, collect or publish data on homeless deaths.

“We have no definition of homeless on the death record on which we can measure homelessness,” OHA spokesman Jonathan Modie said.

Marion and Polk counties also don’t track homeless deaths.

Officials in Multnomah County have taken the initiative since 2011 to partner with the publication Street Roots to create a review of homeless deaths called “Domicile Unknown.”

The review includes personal stories of families whose loved ones died while homeless. It includes photos of the deceased and accounts of the events leading to their deaths.

Staff with the county Medical Examiner’s Office and Multnomah County Health Department work to gather the data on how homeless individuals died and where they were found.

The most recent annual review in 2020 tallied 113 deaths in Multnomah County — the highest since they began tracking the data in 2011.

Nearly half of those who died were found outside in encampments, on sidewalks and in parks. The average age of death was 46.

Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury said during a March 29 public hearing on SB 850 that the report brings to light the harsh realities and immense risks that houseless residents endure. It tells the personal stories of the lives lost, the families left behind and the pain left in the wake of their premature deaths, she added.

“Without producing ‘Domicile Un-

known’ and taking its findings to heart, we stand to lose our sense of outrage, our capacity and degree for, and our willingness to be moved to action by the plight of our neighbors living and dying outside,” Kafoury said.

She said awareness and compassion can lead to action — like one of the biggest investments in homeless services in the country that was passed by voters in the Portland metro area last year.

## ‘She was way too young’

By the fall, Koehmstedt was in constant pain, devastated and heartbroken.

Walker said a previous interaction at a hospital, during which staff threatened to report her to child services, left Koehmstedt terrified of seeking further medical treatment.

When her liver began shutting down in November, Walker was finally able to convince her to go to the emergency room.

“She deteriorated rapidly,” he said. “I couldn’t stand to see her like that.”

Everything shattered after she died a few days later, Walker said. He relapsed. His children went to live with relatives.

He’s now working full time, living with friends and in recovery.

Looking back at the past year, he said his wife would still be alive had they not been homeless and evicted.

“She was way too young,” he said.

## ‘All of them had a name, a story’

According to Jones tracking data, the average age of death of a homeless person in Marion County is 52.

Of the local deaths he’s tracked, Jones said the individuals died in hospitals, motels, under bridges, along creeks and in the streets.

“All of them had a name, a story and an intrinsic human worth that cannot be extinguished by a poverty of their condition,” he said in the public hearing for SB 850.

Other local advocates testified that the reporting would bring not just clarity on how many people are dying, but humanity and dignity to those who died.

Local advocate and volunteer Lynelle Wilcox listed the names of the dead she and others heard by word-of-mouth. Many more are dying than what they hear through the grapevine, she said.

Wilcox personally knew three of the women who died in the last year in Salem.

“Their struggles will always haunt me,” she said.

One had just had surgery to remove a

brain tumor. She was looking forward to the rest of her life and escaping homelessness. Another, struggling with mental illness, had a family trying to reach her. They were unable to find her before she died on the streets.

“They are dying alone, unnoticed and anonymous,” Wilcox said. “We can do better than that, and the first step is knowing how many people are dying outside.”

Many residents submitted written testimony supporting the legislation and pointed to a recent audit of Salem police that suggested more data collection and analysis was needed for better policing.

That same standard of strong, reliable data needs to be applied to homeless deaths, they argued.

“A public reporting requirement to reflect whether someone died homeless in Oregon would provide evidence of what we currently know by word-of-mouth and by personal times of witnessing extreme poverty, illness and death as people on the streets struggle to survive each day,” one Keizer resident said in his written testimony.

Jones said bits of the struggles are known, like the woman who, after giving birth on downtown Salem sidewalks early last year, was found with an open wound on her shoulder. Advocates convinced her to go to the hospital where more than 200 maggots were removed from the wound. She slipped into a coma but survived.

Or the woman found living in a tent surrounded by a quarter-inch of water and feces. She was too weak to walk 30 yards to a nearby portable toilet.

“Her feet had the worst case of trench foot I have ever seen, in working with thousands of homeless clients over the years,” Jone said. “After weeks of work, we placed her in a transitional housing project. Without our intervention, she would have died.”

Just recently, he recounted waking up, rolling over to check his phone and finding out that another client had died from a preventable infection.

Jones said he knows some of the stories firsthand — but so little is known about the big picture.

“In Oregon, it’s our general lack of information about who’s dying outside under what conditions, and what can be done to prevent it,” he said. “Imagine trying to solve any problem without basic fundamental information.”

“It’s like building a house without a blueprint ... Tens of millions that we spend statewide on homelessness in Oregon, and we know next to nothing about the people who are dying outside.”

Sen. Deb Patterson, D-Salem, one of the chief sponsors of SB 850, said homelessness should not be the responsibility of charities; it needs to be part of public policy.

And part of addressing the issue is having good data to understand who is homeless, why they are homeless and how many people are dying while homeless, she said.

Just by looking at Multnomah County’s data, one can see that deaths are on the rise, Patterson added.

She said the bill has garnered a lot of support, and she hopes the data, once collected, will be publicly available.

“We need to know when people die,” Patterson said. “They can’t die anonymously.”

SB 850 is now scheduled for a work session on April 5. Those wishing to submit testimony for or against the proposed bill can find out how online at oregonlegislature.gov.

For questions, comments and news tips, email reporter Whitney Woodworth at [wmwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com](mailto:wmwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com), call 503-910-6616 or follow on Twitter @wmwoodworth.

# Levies

Continued from Page 3A

residents turned on sprinklers on their houses before evacuating and other houses were burned down.

Voltin said the district was able to continue to supply water to firefighters as superintendent Bill Grimes drove around to turn off water at many houses and kept water being filtered at the plant in Lyons so water could continue to flow through the pipes. He kept working even as his own house was burning down a few miles away.

“He did a lot of things probably to save a lot of people’s homes,” Voltin said.

About 50 homes in the district were lost in the wildfires, which means the district’s sole means of income — water bills — will decrease.

Voltin said the district will continue to apply for grants, but much of the potential grant money dried up during the pandemic.

“We need it,” Voltin said. “There’s nothing frivolous in this thing. We’re not just going out there to have some money. We need storage for fire and in the summertime.”

## Woodburn Fire Protection District

The district that covers a 75-square mile area including Woodburn, Gervais and a large area in north Marion County

is asking voters to pass a bond that would give it money to build a new fire station in Gervais, establish a training facility and replace aging emergency vehicles.

Gervais joined the Woodburn Fire District in 1986, and it operated a station there until 2007 when it was closed due to a lack of volunteers responding from home to the station.

With part of the bond money, the district and the city would build a new fire hall and public works building in Gervais.

“That community is growing at a quicker rate than the rest of the Woodburn Fire District,” Woodburn Fire Chief Joe Budge said.

The closest station the district has to Gervais is in Waconda, which is about nine minutes from Gervais. Travel from the main station in Woodburn is about eight minutes.

The proposed Gervais station would include living quarters for out-of-district volunteers and student residents, who would staff the station.

Budge said part of the intention of building a new station in Gervais is to improve the district’s fire rating. He projects the rating could improve enough that insurance for all homeowners in the district would go down by about 5%.

The new 26 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value over 20 years bond would replace a 20-year bond that is set to expire in 2022. The new bond wouldn’t start until the previous one runs out.

“We’re not asking for additional

money, we’re asking for replacement at the current rate,” Budge said.

The bond would raise \$12,760,000 over its span.

The bond also would allow the district to purchase eight new vehicles as those in the current fleet reach the end of their useful lives. The district would also use some of the money to combine with fire districts in Canby, Hubbard and Aurora to build a training facility.

“We don’t have any,” Budge said. “Right now, we have to go down to the Brooks campus (of Chemeketa Community College) to do that. That’s not a huge deal other than we don’t have access all the time. We haven’t had access to it at all this year.”

## Marion County Fire District 1 levy

The district that covers 55,000 people over 80 square miles of Marion County, including east Salem, is trying to pass an operational levy for the third time in as many elections.

After the two levies failed in 2020, resulting in \$2.4 million in budget cuts, the district laid off 12 firefighters and closed two fire stations.

The district is asking voters to pass a 59 cents per \$1,000 operational levy — reduced from the 99 cents and 77 cents asks voted down in the prior two elections — for a five-year period.

Marion County Fire District 1 chief Kyle McMann said if the levy is passed, it will allow the district to hire nine firefighters at the Middle Grove station,

which serves most of east Salem.

That engine company would allow the district to have one dedicated engine company around the clock, and also allow it to have a dedicated ambulance crew.

If approved, the levy would provide the district approximately \$10.8 million over five years.

“There’s no savings. There’s no apparatus. That’s only to put that in for five years,” McMann said.

## Mill City Rural Fire Protection District

The fire department is asking voters to renew a five-year 30 cents per \$1,000 operational levy to pay the salary of fire chief Leland Ohrt.

Ohrt and part-time office administrator Justin Merrill are the only paid staff members of the district. The rest of the fire fighting and paramedics services are done by volunteers.

“The wildfires were nuts,” Merrill said. “We were here for three, four days straight. It was very tough on the guys.”

The current operations levy expires in June. The new levy would raise approximately \$236,000 over the five years.

The district uses all of the property taxes it receives to fund operations and maintenance of equipment.

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