Claire Withycombe/Oregon Capital Bureau, File

State Sen. Bill Hansell, far left, speaks on the Oregon Senate floor on June 29, 2019. The Republican from Athena backs a legislative proposal in the upcoming 2021 session to address the state's homeless youth crisis.

YOUTH

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provide assistance to those who need it," Hansell said. "We're seeing an increase in the homeless youth for whatever reason, but not only that — I've been told that Oregon has the highest number of homeless youth in the nation."

In fact, Oregon is tied for the highest percentage of homeless youth in the United States alongside Alaska, Nevada, Washington, California and the District of Columbia, according to a wallethub study. That study also placed Oregon among the states with the highest percentage of homeless youth drug users.

The number of youth who can be classified as homeless in Oregon has been shown to jump during periods of economic hardship. The Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, which has lobbied the state legislature in support of the bill, claim that the number of homeless youth in Oregon jumped by 32% during the 2008 recession.

The COVID-19 pandemic also has exacerbated the homeless youth crisis. State tracking of homeless youth under the McKinney-Vento Act found 80 students at La Grande School District were unsheltered during the 2019-20 school year, up from 40 the previous year.

"We're expecting to see a big increase in the coming years," said Olivia Asato, a public policy associate with the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. "The impact will continue on beyond this year.… A lot of the numbers (for this year) have gone down, and that's just due to distance learning. Homeless students become hard to identify when you're doing virtual learning, especially when they're unaccompanied."

While Oregon's homeless youth crisis is measurably severe, debate remains over why. Senator Hansell attributed the situation to a breakdown of a more traditional family structure.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the breakdown of the nuclear family," Hansell said. "What used to be the norm doesn't seem to be the norm anymore, with the kind of structure that homes had. I'm not saying we were ever perfect, I'm not saying we were ever where we should be or we didn't have problems, but I think that with the rise of things that aren't necessarily good for society … those types of things and those types of behaviors aren't good, I don't think, for the family structure."

Hansell said those types of behaviors include an over-embracing of drug use and substance abuse.

Asato, however, said youth in Oregon are often pushed into homelessness for four main reasons: economic insecurity, domestic violence, substance abuse by adults in the household and failure to support LGBTQ+ youth.

"We think it's really important to identify these (causes) to dissuade stereotypes that homeless youth just don't want to follow the rules of their household and things like that," Asato said.

LC 2625 likely will change before it reaches Hansell in the Oregon Senate, as it's set to be introduced in the House of Representatives first. That may be for the best, as Asato said the $4.4 million in host home and shelter funding won't be enough to solve the homeless youth crisis.

"This isn't a high enough number," Asato said. "In an ideal world, more money would be invested, but you know, it's a budget cut year in a pandemic."

Regardless, Hansell said the Legislature needs to deal with homeless youth sooner rather than later.

"It's an issue that I think we need to address," Hansell said.

RAMP

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Dick Mason/The Observer

Members of the La Grande Rural Fire Department built this ramp for Ray Hamann, retired department chief Ray Hamann. The ramp covers an old sidewalk at Hamann's home in Island City.

training they needed.

Hamann said he was moved by what his old fire department did for him.

"They are a great bunch of people," Hamann said.

The La Grande Rural Fire Department regularly reaches out to its community. For example, it helps youths from families in need buy Christmas presents via its Shop with a Firefighter program and provides Thanksgiving dinners for the less fortunate.

Hamann said he is impressed with the job the department has done since he left. He knows firsthand the calls it responds to by monitoring them via a radio scanner. Hamann said the radio helps him stay connected to a world he enjoyed being a part of.

Firefighting, Hamann said, "gets in your blood."

ELGIN

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McConnell said most of the additional losses would be felt in Umatilla County.

The commercial logging industry would lose 52 jobs as an indirect consequence of an Elgin mill shutdown, and another 14 would be lost in support activities for agriculture and forestry. Crop farming, truck transportation, hospitals, restaurants and even real estate also could lose jobs.

The report estimated that tax revenue across all affected counties would drop by more than $195,000 at the county level, more than $920,000 at the state level and almost $2.5 million at the federal level.

"This analysis shows that, along with the direct and indirect economic loss, there will be significant economic losses throughout the region due to the 'multiplier' effects of the lost incomes," the report stated. "These effects will be felt by businesses of all types, primarily within Elgin, but throughout Union County and the greater region."

Importantly, the analysis did not account fully for the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using data from the second quarter of 2020, the EOCEI found the mill's closure could yield even greater losses that were predicted in the analysis.

"There is evidence that the impact could be potentially greater with new COVID numbers," said Cedric Riel, an EOU economics student who helped develop the analysis. "That's a point of emphasis for me, is that this is developed off of 2018 economic data. With the new COVID data, there's evidence that the indirect employment loss increased by a factor of 12."

The COVID-19 pandemic did not reach its state of protracted severity in Union County until the fourth quarter of 2020, which suggests the pandemic could exacerbate the effects of the mill closure. Sarah Buddingh, another student who worked on the EOCEI analysis, agreed.

"The really scary thing is that it could be so much worse," she said.

INSKO

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2019 to fall 2020 fell by 10.8%, from 1,508 to 1,345 students. Off-campus enrollment also fell from 1,246 to 1,153 students — a drop of more than 7%.

Eastern also recorded declines in overall enrollment for both full-time and part-time students from fall 2019 to fall 2020 terms. Enrollment for the coming semester was expected to be flat from fall 2020 as well, according to EOU's vice president for university advancement, Tim Seydel.

EOU Board of Trustees Chairman Richard Chaves credited Insko's leadership, saying he'd been instrumental in minimizing damage from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as shoring up the university's financial position during recent years.

"Today, even having gone through the pandemic this last year, EOU is in the strongest financial position in the history of EOU," Chaves said.

He went on to say EOU has fared far better than other universities through the pandemic, many of which have had to cut programs or lay off employees due to decreased revenue.

"If you look at EOU, we have not had to take those kind of drastic measures," Chaves said. "In fact, we haven't had any permanent layoffs, except one, which was due to the closure of our copy center, and that was planned before the pandemic hit."

Chaves said while he couldn't speak on the full board's behalf, its members generally "felt that president Insko was performing beyond what he was being paid, especially in comparison with most other universities in the state."

To illustrate that point, Chaves pointed out Insko had turned down bonuses offered to him by the board in prior years. He also noted Eastern's faculty and administrative professionals had received raises of more than 3%, and workers with the Service Employees International Union, which represents public sector employees, received a 6.85% bonus.

But that did not stop the union's local are of SEIU 503 from voicing its displeasure with Insko's windfall in a recent press release.

"Part of the reason that the universities were unable to maintain full staffing was a lack of revenue in the form of tuition," SEIU 503 said. "That is why it was so frustrating to see Eastern Oregon University announce that it will be giving its President, Tom Insko, a $22,500 end of the year bonus, which is on top of his $250,351 salary. That is more than five times the average salary of a Classified employee."

In fact, Insko's $22,500 in bonuses represent more than a significant portion of people in La Grande earn in a year, coming in at more than half the city's median annual income.

According to the city of La Grande's 2019 housing needs analysis, median local income in 2017 was just $40,750, which was nearly $16,000 below the statewide average.

The analysis also found nearly two in five people in La Grande earned less than $30,000 per year in 2017, before the economic hardship of the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Eastern Oregon University's presidential annual salary of $250,351 is more than six times the median income in La Grande and 29% more than the median price of a home in the city in 2019, as listed by the housing needs report.