

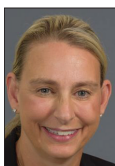
Lawmakers seek more mental health funding

By DIRK VANDERHART
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — The Oregon Legislature is getting ready to pass the largest investment in the state's mental health system in recent memory — a development that advocates and lawmakers say could lead to meaningful changes in a system that has been unable to meet demand.



Nosse



Lieber

In a package likely to reach at least \$350 million, lawmakers are hoping to pay for a "surge" in workers available to address mental health issues at all levels, spring

for new housing and outreach programs, and take a long look at how the state's overall system should be restructured.

That investment, proponents say, will allow Oregon to begin digging out of a mental health and homelessness crisis thrown into stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's not going to all roll out smoothly or awesomely, but we're going to get started," said state Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, who co-chairs a budget subcommittee dealing with health care. "We'll all hopefully look back four to six years from now and go, '2021 was the year things started to turn around.'"

The problems facing Oregon's mental health system are not new. Advocates have long argued that the state needs to fund more treatment at the community level, rather than waiting for people with mental health issues to devolve to the point they need higher levels of care or hospitalization.

But that type of extended investment hasn't occurred. Two years ago, lawmakers even considered cutting funds for county-based mental health programs based on modeling many found dubious.

In the meantime, Oregon's unsheltered homeless population has increased, with many in that population struggling with mental health issues.

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EO Media Group, File

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pital to treat in short order. The explosion in that population has crowded out other, potentially more appropriate, cases the hospital could treat, and comes amid a dire staffing shortage brought on by the pandemic.

In oft-cited — and sometimes disputed — national rankings by the group Mental Health America, Oregon's mental health system comes in 49 out of 51, a function of having the nation's highest prevalence of mental illness, and only middle-of-the-pack access to care.

"Not only do we not have any off-ramps before people get there, we've got people stuck at the state hospital because there are no step-downs" to less-intensive care, said state Sen. Kate Lieber, D-Beaverton, who has been working with Nosse to create a funding package this year.

Lieber is a former prosecutor who came to the Legislature this year having served on the state's Psychiatric Security Review Board, which decides when people found "guilty except for insanity" are fit to leave the state hospital. She says she ran for office with an interest in figuring out how the mental health system interacted with rising homelessness.

Large areas of need

Together with Nosse, Lieber began speaking with people throughout the mental health system about the largest areas of needs. "We talked to a ton of people, and it was like we were hearing the same thing: gotta invest in community," she said.

The exercise could have been little more than a thought experiment, but then the state saw a windfall. Not only did the federal government send Oregon \$2.6 billion through the American Rescue Plan Act passed in March, but a May revenue forecast suggested the state had billions more dollars to spend than previously expected.

So when Nosse and Lieber put together a formal budget proposal, "I think people were ready to hear it," Lieber said. "And quite frankly, we had the money to do it."

While the numbers are still subject to the overall budget process, lawmakers working on a spending plan say it will likely be roughly \$350 million.

"This is a really big swing," Nosse said. "I've never been involved with anything this massive."

As currently envisioned, the first piece is the roughly \$100 million "surge" meant to help incentivize people to go into behavioral health professions — and remain there — through scholarships, student loan forgiveness, and other inducements. A bill drafted by state Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Clackamas, to increase diversity in the state's behavioral health workforce is the vehicle for that investment.

A second piece would put money into new housing and treatment options for people with mental health challenges. As laid out by Lieber and Nosse, the state would put \$20 million into a new fund specifically for behavioral health housing. And the Legislature would set aside up to \$180 million in a "regional development

and innovation" pot reserved for community mental health agencies, which could apply for funding their most pressing needs.

The proposal also contains money to open two units at the Oregon State Hospital's campus in Junction City for people who need less than hospital-level care. The new capacity would free up bed space in the main hospital, lawmakers say.

And the package would potentially fund four "peer respite centers" run by people with a lived experience of mental illness, along with helping pay for community behavioral health clinics that can assist with physical ailments while also being treated for mental health challenges.

The proposal by Nosse and Lieber appears all but certain to pass this year, with the state's top budget writers affirming their support. That has advocates who've long pushed for more investment talking with a new optimism.

COVID-19

Oregon 65K shots shy of lifting mandates

Oregon Health Authority averaging 13,484 shots per day

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon needs just over 65,000 more people to get their first COVID-19 vaccination shot for the state to lift most restrictions statewide.

"We are incredibly close to achieving a 70% statewide adult vaccination rate, bringing us closer to returning to a sense of normalcy," Gov. Kate Brown said in a statement Tuesday, June 15.

The Oregon Health Authority said 65,484 more shots were needed as of mid-day to pass 70% of eligible adult residents having received one shot.

OHA reported it was averaging 13,484 shots per day, which includes each shot of the two-shot Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, as well as the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Half of all Oregon's eligible adults are now completely vaccinated, OHA also reported.

The daily totals are down sharply from April, when the state topped 50,000 shots on its biggest vaccination days.

Demand for vaccinations has slowed in the past month, as those eager to be vaccinated against the virus have been served. What's left is residents for whom vaccination is inconvenient or who have doubts about getting the shots.

Oregon Republi-

cans have been critical of Brown's approach throughout most of the pandemic, despite the state's low infection and death rates compared to most of the rest of the nation.

Critics say restrictions have unnecessarily hamstrung the Oregon economy as other states had fewer or sometimes no restrictions. Now Brown is being cast as out of step even with Democratic governors in California and Washington.

House Minority Leader Christine Drazan, R-Canby, released a public letter to Brown on June 15 calling for her to follow the example of California, where Gov. Gavin Newsom opened the state to most activities.

"Oregon does not need to be the most restrictive state on the West Coast, or one of the last states to reopen nationwide," Drazan wrote.

Citing vaccines, improved medical treatment for infections, and the "natural immunity" of those who contracted COVID-19 and survived, Drazan said there were enough safeguards to lift restrictions immediately.

"If we include Oregonians with natural immunity, then we are well above the 70 percent threshold to reopen the state," Drazan wrote. "Oregonians have been through enough. They do not need to wait another day."

The range of restrictions differs from county to county in Oregon as Brown has taken steps to remove limits in areas that have put at least one shot into the arms of 65% of eligible adult residents.

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