

52 Pills Per Person

DATA SHOWS LANE COUNTY HAS BEEN AWASH IN PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS

By Renata S. Geraldo

At the height of the prescription drug crisis a decade ago, Lane County pharmacies dispensed enough opioid pain medication to give 52 pills each year to every single man, woman, child and infant in the county.

That's one of the takeaways from data obtained by *The Washington Post* under the Freedom of Information Act from the Drug Enforcement Administration. The *Post* released a massive database charting opioid prescriptions filled between 2006 and 2012.

The national prescription opioid epidemic is still leading an average of five Oregonians per week to die of opioid overdose. Oregon has one of the highest levels of opioid misuse in the country.

With a population of more than 374,000 residents, Lane County received 128 million opioid pain pills from 2006 to 2012, the data shows.

The store that stood out the most in numbers in the county was Bi-Mart. Its pharmacy in Springfield

received almost 7 million opioid pills. Two Bi-Marts in Eugene received about 3 million opioid pills each.

A single Safeway pharmacy in Cottage Grove received 4 million pills during that period.

Neither Safeway nor Bi-Mart would comment directly on the data to *Eugene Weekly*.

Andrew Whelan, Safeway's director of internal communications, sent *EW* a press release from the National Association of Chain Drug Stores.

"Every day, pharmacists face a moment of truth when presented with an opioid prescription, making decisions as a provider of patient care and as part of the solution to the opioid-abuse epidemic. Patients understand that community pharmacy is part of the solution, providing trusted advice and quality healthcare services," it read.

Bi-Mart did not respond to *EW's* phone calls or emails for comment.

The numbers are staggering but not surprising, says Dr. Tom Jeanne, deputy state health officer and epidemiologist from the Oregon Health Authority. They correspond to the data the OHA already had, he said.

The period from 2006 to 2012 is significant because, during that time, opioids were at their peak as alternatives for pain killers, says Joe Schnabel, executive director of the Oregon Board of Pharmacy.

But in the past five years, Schnabel said, people started paying attention to overdoses and opioid addiction.

Lane County still has a high number of opioid prescription fills. For every 1,000 residents, 201 prescriptions were filled, according to OHA data for the first quarter of 2019. The number is higher than the state average, which has 158 prescriptions per 1,000 residents.

While the Lane County prescription number is higher than the state average, it is decreasing. In 2012, Lane County had 271 prescriptions filled for every 1,000 residents.

According to federal law, both the clinician who prescribes and the pharmacist who fills the prescription can be held responsible for any misconduct.

"The responsibility for the proper prescribing and dispensing of controlled substances is upon the prescribing practitioner, but a corresponding responsibility rests with the pharmacist who fills the prescription," Code 1306.14 of Title 21 of the Code of Federal Regulations reads.

Jeanne says he is hopeful the epidemic will be brought under control. The number of patients receiving opioids dropped 61 percent in the span of five years, he said, and overdose deaths also decreased.

But according to the numbers, there's still a long way to go. ■

slant

• Climate change isn't real, right? Tell that to the **Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which is contemplating building a retractable dome over its outdoor Allen Elizabethan Theatre**, according to a story in the *Medford Mail Tribune*. OSF lost \$5.4 million during its 2017 and 2018 seasons, largely because smoke from persistent southern Oregon wildfires forced cancellations of late-summer outdoor shows in the iconic 1,200-seat theater. As Hamlet might say, OSF's "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" — that's perhaps an allusion to the cost of such a dome — will protect theatergoers from "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours."

• **Oregon's Sen. Jeff Merkley kicked off his re-election campaign July 27 in Eugene.** So far, he has no opponent. What about Congressman Greg Walden from eastern Oregon? He's the leading Republican

politician in Oregon, but it's unlikely he will take on the popular progressive Merkley. It will be good news if Merkley has only token opposition because that will free him to help other Democrats try to take back the Senate from Mitch McConnell and his wrecking crew. November 2020 is not that far away.

• **Is this area a draw for homeless people because of good social services?** The final City Club of Eugene meeting of the summer was a depressing one on the grim challenge of homelessness in the Eugene-Springfield area. The 2019 Point in Time count showed an increase of 32 percent in the number of unsheltered people from 2018. Speakers at the meeting were Lise Stuart from the county, Shannon Smyth from Eugene Mission and Kris McAllister, a leader from Carry It Forward, a grassroots organization supporting unhoused individuals. The recurring question about drawing people here was addressed by Stuart, a management analyst, who said we have no data to support that view. Dan Bryant said he has been invited to speak in countless Oregon communities, all seeking help with the same

problems. What about prevention? What about more help from the state and the federal government? This was a meeting with more questions than answers.

• We're all animal lovers at *EW*, so it was with sadness **we read this week of the death of Chaser, said to be the smartest dog in the world.** The enthusiastic border collie was owned by the late John W. Pilley, a psychology professor who taught her to understand more than 1,000 English words and then published an academic paper in 2013 showing that she could understand not just words but simple syntax as well. His work with Chaser — he trained her for up to five hours a day — confirms that many animals have a deeper ability to communicate than we give them credit for. Chaser, who was 15, died July 23 of natural causes; Pilley died last year at 89.

• **The UO womens' soccer team opens its season Aug. 17** against the University of British Columbia right here in Eugene. We hope good crowds will gather, playing off the smashing success of the U.S. team in the World Cup.



CALL TO ARTISTS **UpStream Art**
Small Mural Project



We will be commissioning several artists to paint downtown-area storm drains with images about stormwater and water quality.
Applications due: **5 p.m. Thursday, August 22.**
Mural painting dates: **September 23 & 24.**

If you are an artist who is passionate about rivers, wildlife and clean water, this is your chance to make a statement in our community.

Details and application form available at **happyrivers.org**





beads
from around the world

2833 Willamette • (541) 683-5903
www.harlequinbeads.com

Maple Star provides training, certification, and support to care for Oregon's most vulnerable children.

Grassroots, Community-Focused, Responsive, and Trauma Informed.



maplestaror.org
503.290.1900
Let's Talk Foster Care!