

How Liberty House fights child abuse

BY CHARLES GLENN
Of the Keizertimes

Despite the passage of the 2008 Karly's Law - named for a 3-year old Corvallis girl who died after her abuse went unreported - child abuse is on the rise in Oregon. The Child Welfare Division at the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS), who manages the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline (ORCAH), claims they received more than 80,000 reports of abuse and neglect in 2021, up 8% from 2020.

Liberty House is the designated Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) for Marion and Polk counties - one of 22 CACs in Oregon and one of more than 900 across the country. In observance of April as Child Abuse Prevention month, Keizer City Council invited representatives from Salem Liberty House to speak about their work and the challenges they are facing at the April 18 council meeting.

"There are three key areas in what we do: Clinical assessment, health and wellness - including mental health - and prevention," said Liberty House Deputy Executive Director Bruce Anderson. "We also facilitate the multi-disciplinary team established in statute, which brings together Liberty House, county child welfare services, DHS, law enforcement and our district attorneys."

Anderson said caseloads have been increasing at a high rate in recent years.

"We've seen a double-digit increase in our case load over the last two years - with rates more than 30% higher than they were in 2019," he said.

Anderson's numbers match what has been happening across the country in the last decade. According a study done in 2013 by scholars at the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment

Center and published in the Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care - about one in every 10 American children will be sexually abused before the age of 18.

Anderson said Liberty House is particularly well-equipped to meet this challenge.

"We support children and families in getting the help they need through fewer appointments and more coordination - and our staff supports families both in English and Spanish," he said. "We're child-focused, so that the child - our patient - is guiding things forward, not us."

He said they are staffed with medical professionals in a specially-trained area of pediatrics who can do assessments of children from newborn to 18 years of age in cases where abuse is suspected.

"Our staff is trained to identify subtle aspects of child abuse that sometimes get overlooked," he said.

Through their health and wellness program, Liberty House can help children cope with the trauma they experienced. Anderson said the program can even help adults who experienced abuse as children.

Liberty House Prevention Program Director Kyle Tarr also spoke to the council, explaining the role of prevention and the philosophy behind their work.

"We utilize Darkness to Light as our foundational training," said Tarr, referring to the a non-profit which sponsors research and education into child sex abuse prevention. Darkness to Light funded the study cited above which determined one in every 10 American children suffer from child abuse and they provide tools to CACs all over the country.

"It's the only national program that's proven to increase knowledge, improve attitudes, and



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Salem's Liberty House, located on 4th St. NE in Salem, is the designated Child Advocacy Center for Marion and Polk Counties.

FILE PHOTO

change child protective behaviors," he said.

Tarr said Liberty House focuses on preventing not only sexual abuse, but digital abuse - a rising problem among youth with ever-increasing access to social media. He said there are a number of ways people can get involved, starting with scheduling a free training session.

"Reach out and contact us," he said. "We can schedule up to five people per class."

Liberty House works closely with local non-profits and agencies including CASA of Marion County. The Oregon Child Abuse Hotline is (855) 503-7233. You can find out more about Darkness to Light at d2l.org.

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No more masks on mass transit

BY CHARLES GLENN
Of the Keizertimes

Although the US Justice Department said today they might appeal the decision, a federal court judge in Florida effectively ended the federal mask mandate this week. Within hours, airports and mass transit agencies across the country were announcing they were dropping the requirement, including the Salem-Keizer area Cherriots service.

"Effective immediately, masks are optional for Cherriots riders and employees," said a press release on April 19.

Most of the other local agencies, colleges and universities, including nearby Chemeketa Community College, dropped their mandates in March - however most hospital and medical care settings in Oregon still require facial coverings.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) also announced yesterday that they would not be enforcing the mandate while the Justice Department reviews its options, which impacts every airport, train and bus station in the country.

This doesn't mean the end of masks while traveling, of course - individual airlines and local transit agencies can make their own rules regarding masks, such as New York's MTA, who said today they would continue to require them on New York subways and busses.

Meanwhile the Center for Disease Control continues to recommend mask-wearing as a precaution against infection while in enclosed areas. Here in Oregon, mask requirements are dropping everywhere - just as COVID numbers are spiking again with the BA.2 variant, which has quickly become the dominant strain infecting the most people.

The decisions surrounding mask mandates are largely based on the numbers of cases rising or falling in any given area. Here in Oregon, those numbers are generated by the Oregon Health Authority, whose experts reminded journalists at a media availability on April 20 that the primary defense against COVID is getting vaccinated and boosted.

Public health physicians with the OHA, Dr. Tom Jeanne and Dr. Paul Cieslak,

fielded questions from reporters about how the mandate-lift would impact the so-called "undercount," which indicates the existence of COVID cases in Oregon which aren't being reported or tracked.

See **MANDATE**, page 2



Photo courtesy of Cherriots.