

Gaps: County faces challenges in treating the mentally ill

Continued from Page 1A

A crisis respite center planned for Warrenton could also provide an alternative to jail or hospitalization.

But Clatsop County District Attorney Josh Marquis said in July that the county is in crisis on mental health, and documents reviewed by The Daily Astorian under the state’s public records law confirm a perception that the county is falling short.

Columbia Memorial Hospital and Providence Seaside are not certified to provide involuntary care, custody or treatment for the mentally ill, so Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare has to find acute care psychiatric hospitals elsewhere in the state, a challenging and often unpredictable process.

Astoria Police Chief Brad Johnston believes law enforcement is left in an impossible situation.

“No one wants the police to be the people that are dealing with the critically mentally ill,” he said. “Nobody wants it to become criminalized. Nobody wants force used. Nobody wants tragedies to occur.

“But, because of a lack of other resources, the police tend to be that safety net for all of the other social agencies. And we end up being the people that are responding.

“And we’re responding to people that professional mental health workers have been unable to reach, family has been unable to reach, and then a stranger in a blue suit is being asked to come in and solve the problem.”

A tragic suicide

The county’s struggle to care for the mentally ill was brought into public focus in April after Carrie Barnhart, a 54-year-old mother of six with a history of mental illness, jumped off the Astoria Bridge.

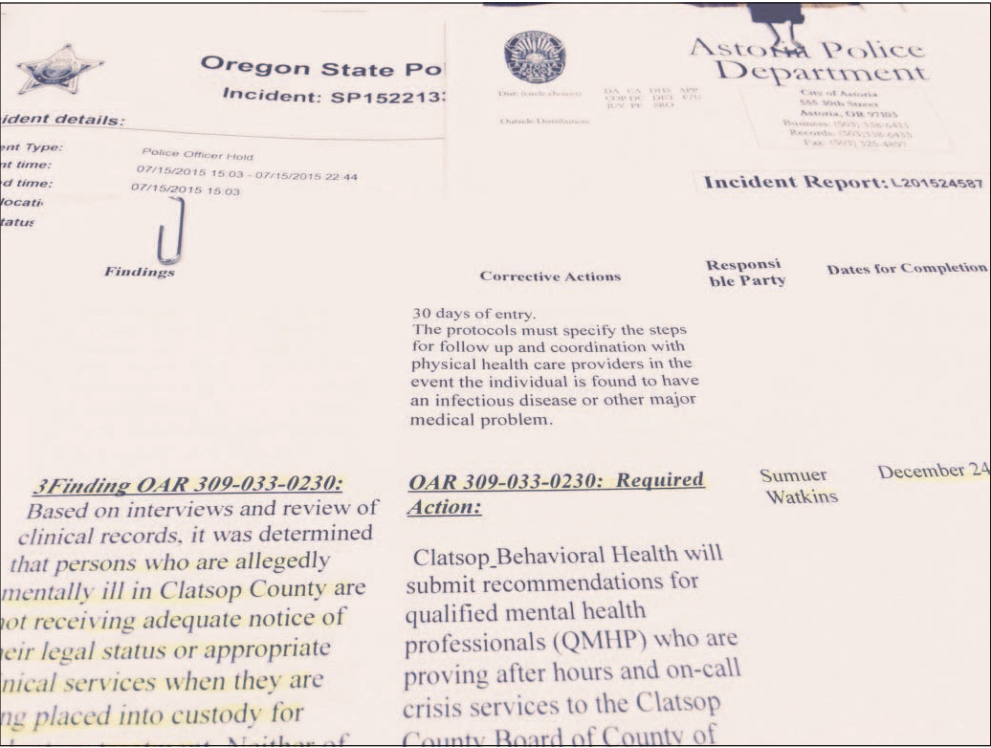
Astoria Police had responded to Barnhart’s suicide warnings four times in the months before her death. The week before Barnhart killed herself, police had taken her off the bridge after midnight and brought her to Columbia Memorial Hospital, where she was evaluated by Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare and released after two hours.

The Daily Astorian, through the public records law, requested documents related to suicide from the county and the police after Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare chose not to answer questions about what steps the agency had taken to prevent similar tragedies.

The documents show, and the newspaper has confirmed, that the state Office of Adult Abuse Prevention and Investigations is conducting an investigation into Barnhart’s death.

While Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare may have done everything available under the law to help Barnhart, the documents suggest a serious degree of concern about the agency’s performance.

County Manager Scott Somers, after reading a news article about Barnhart’s suicide, called a meeting with staffers who work on mental health ser-



Records from Clatsop County, the Astoria Police Department and the Oregon State Police show the challenges of treating the mentally ill.

vices to discuss ongoing concerns with the agency. He said many in the community were “pretty outraged.”

“From the article, it sound(s) like another case of denying admission to someone in need,” Somers wrote in an email. “This is the consistent message we’ve been hearing.”

Sumner Watkins, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, has been sensitive about public perceptions of the agency and her leadership.

In an extraordinary email sent to community leaders in June, Watkins apologized and sought to repair any potential rifts. She said she had heard of consistent feedback that she had not been displaying appropriate leadership skills and was defensive and abrasive.

“I am reaching out to all community partners that I have personally interacted with over the last year to apologize for any offensive behavior that I may have exhibited,” Watkins wrote. “Please know that this is not the person that I wish to be nor has it ever been my intent. If even one person has experienced this with me, I am truly saddened.”

Clatsop County Sheriff Tom Bergin offered Watkins some encouragement.

“You personally have done a great job but the problem is that the system is broken, not you,” the sheriff wrote in an email.

“The bar has been raised so high over the last 20 years to actually identify one with mental illness for detention, is sad to say the least. There are no beds, the facilities that do exist are overwhelmed and let’s face it, it’s just easier to walk away and ignore people in our

society, especially when a lot of the current mental illness in our communities is from people making poor choices with the methamphetamine and drug epidemic.”

Improving crisis response

Cracks in mental health care are not unique to Clatsop County or other rural parts of the state. The federal government has prodded Oregon to improve mental health treatment.

But counties and cities have complained that federal and state money does not match the mandate, leaving local officials with the responsibility — but not the resources — to respond to patients in crisis.

This year, the state Legislature approved an additional \$20 million for housing for people with mental illnesses or addictions.

Lawmakers also adopted a change to the law that expands the definition of mental illness for purposes of civil commitment.

In Astoria, Mayor Arline LaMear has appointed a task force to look at homelessness and mental health issues that includes Police Chief Johnston and Watkins of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

Watkins, in a written statement, said Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare has committed to hiring an additional worker to coordinate care and provide outreach to people in need of crisis services, arranged for the training of all employees in the sanctuary model approach to providing services, and continued to reduce the time between initial assessments and treatment.

Kevin Campbell, the chief executive officer of Greater

Oregon Behavioral Health Inc., which manages mental health services in Clatsop and several other counties, said in a statement that the agency has been working closely with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare to improve the lines of communication with law enforcement and the justice system.

At a Clatsop County Board of Commissioners work session in July, Scott Lee, the board chairman, expressed his confidence in Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare and joined others in suggesting that the agency simply needed to publicly share successful outreach.

But public and private agencies that make life-and-death decisions often get measured — fairly or not — by failures.

After near misses or crashes, airlines — as District Attorney Marquis said after the work session — do not get judged by how many planes land safely.

‘A danger to himself and others’

On a Wednesday afternoon in July, an Oregon State Police trooper came across a blue Saab sedan parked on the shoulder of U.S. Highway 26. A 25-year-old man — a former star football player, 6’4” and about 270 pounds — had configured his belongings along the roadway and covered the car with a tarp.

A good Samaritan had pulled over and was trying to help.

Wearing only athletic pants, the man, who was attempting to hitchhike, explained that his car had attacked him and that he feared the car and his belongings.

The man removed his clothes, then put his pants back on. “In my opinion,” the state trooper wrote in his report, the man “was clearly a danger to himself and others. I knew I would not allow him to drive a vehicle in his condition.

“I also began to be concerned for my own safety, as (the man) would speak to me briefly and coherently, and then abruptly stop speaking and stare at me as if he were looking through me.”

After talking on the phone with the man’s mother, the troop-



A makeshift memorial under the Astoria Bridge honors Carrie Barnhart, who committed suicide in April.

er learned the man had a mental health condition and had experienced a great digression in the past few weeks. The trooper convinced the man, after a lengthy discussion, to be handcuffed and taken to Columbia Memorial Hospital for evaluation by Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

What happened next illustrates the shortcomings with the county’s mental health safety net.

A long wait

A Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare worker asked the state trooper — according to his report — whether he needed any paperwork about the man. The trooper said he did not.

Four hours later, the trooper learned the inquiry was actually about whether he wanted to place a mental health hold on the man. “I was completely unaware she had meant that at the time,” wrote the trooper, who wondered why it took so long to initiate a hold.

When the man’s mother arrived at the hospital late that evening, the man refused to leave with her.

Instead, he walked out of the hospital and reached the parking lot of the Columbia River Maritime Museum, near the Peacock pilot boat, before being stopped and handcuffed by the trooper, who had also called Astoria Police for help.

Back at the hospital, Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare finally placed a hold on the man.

Yet over the next few days, Astoria Police were called multiple times about the man acting erratically or leaving the hospital. In one episode, a police report shows, the man dropped his pants and flashed his genitals towards a police officer and a nurse. After pulling up his pants, the man, with an odd smile on his face, started to shadow box while staring at the police officer.

The frustration, spelled out in police reports and emails, was whether Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare or the hospital had a plan to treat the man, who was allowed to walk around the

Astin: Owner ‘needs room to (breathe) from adoring fans ... and insensitive trespassers’

Continued from Page 1A

Astoria-Warrenton Chamber of Commerce and the city to help curb the relentless tide of tourists.

“She needs room to (breathe) from adoring fans and tactless and insensitive trespassers,” Astin wrote.

Asked why he issued his plea to Goonies enthusiasts, Astin said, “I think I was in a position to have an impact on this story. Everybody, of course, understands the importance of courtesy,” he said. “But sometimes we, the public, don’t often behave properly.”

Sometimes leadership is required, he said, to encourage people to “tap into the better part of ourselves.”

Astin, 44, lives in Los Angeles and has starred in other beloved films, including “Rudy” and “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy.

Attempts by The Daily Astorian to interview Preston have been unsuccessful.

‘Something has to give’

At the time of the interview Friday, Astin’s appeal had already reached a quarter million people. The vast preponderance of comments agree with him, he said. And he hopes that attitude of understanding reaches the people who have so far failed to be respectful.

Preston, he pointed out, has gone so far as to open her home to Goonies fans. “That kind of generosity needs to be reciprocated,” he said.

No longer, however, is the problem limited to fans leaving cigarette butts and beer bottles after loitering about the property. The popularity of the film, Astin said, “has grown so much something has to give.”

Astin said there are probably ways for Preston, the city and possibly Warner Bros. to come together and work out a solution in which everyone wins. Perhaps the Goonies house could one day become

a museum or a for-profit venture, he said.

His Facebook message asks Goonies producer Steven Spielberg and director Richard Donner to “help establish an appropriate tourist outpost in concert with the city.”

But, right now, a private resident owns the home, someone who has helped carry the spirit of the movie into the next generation, and who deserves to sleep comfortably and live her life in peace, he said.

“I absolutely love how much the movie has grown in the hearts of people,” Astin said. “I think it’s awesome for people to make a trip to see, not just the house, but the places where we filmed.”

He said he would not want to diminish that feeling for people. And he recognizes how much time, effort and money it takes for Goonies fans be near the site of their cherished childhood movie.

“I recognize all that,” he said. “All I’m saying is that it’s important to be respectful.”

A whale of a sight



Neal Maine/For The Daily Astorian

The Daily Astorian

Wildlife photographer Neal Maine captured several shots of humpback whales last week near the Hammond Marina. View more of his shots online at www.dailyastorian.com. Several Oregon and Washington state residents have also reported seeing the awe-inspiring creatures.