

Care center: 'This is rough'

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the center's support staff, though not in the nursing staff "because we need them; that's where the shortage is," she said.

Some of the employees may get transferred to other district sites.

"We really want to retain as many people as we can within the health district," Mandy Brenchley, the care center administrator, said.

The Clatsop Care Health District oversees Clatsop Care Center, Clatsop Retirement Village in Astoria and Clatsop Memory Care Center in Warrenton, and provides in-home care throughout the community. The district encompasses all of the county except the cities of Gearhart, Seaside and Cannon Beach.

'Very hard work'

The steady decline in certified nursing assistants has put increasing pressure on the center's staff, and led the facility to roll back the number of residents it can accept.

In 2011, the center served an average of 60 residents — including both long- and short-term care residents — though it is licensed to serve more than 70.

The center began this month with 40 residents, which requires the equivalent of 25.5 full-time certified nursing assistants. But, because the center had only 18.5, the number of short-term residents — the people recovering from surgery or other health issues — has been temporarily reduced so staff can focus on long-term care residents, bringing the total resident population down to 30.

The center plans to raise the short-term resident population to 12 by July — both to sustain themselves financially and to continue providing the rehab service for the community.

"This has been an issue for us, to staff this building, for some time. We've been working on it pretty aggressively since 2013," Williams said at a meeting Saturday. Though the center is currently in compliance with state regulations, "we've actually had some citations from the state regarding staffing."

A combination of factors has brought about the scarcity, Brenchley said.

Many certified nursing assistants view the job as a way to gain experience before continuing their nursing education, or as a stepping stone to a higher position or better paying job. "It's not a destination profession, if you know what I mean," Brenchley said.

Some Clatsop Care Center employees have been let go for performance issues.

"We do want to maintain a certain standard, and when employees fall below that standard — whether we're desperate for those positions or not — we do feel it's necessary to terminate employment when needed in order to prevent negative outcomes in care," she said.

Employee burnout is another issue. "It's hard work," she said. "It's very hard work."

Statewide shortage

The challenges of finding certified nursing assistants are not unique to Clatsop Care Center.

"I think they are more pronounced because we are a rural community, but I know this is happening all over the state of Oregon," Brenchley said.



Clatsop Care Center.

Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian



Nicole Williams, the CEO at Clatsop Care Center, speaks during a meeting with residents and their families on Saturday.

Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Statewide, "fewer and fewer people are actively seeking long-term care as a career," she said. "It's not really a profession that people actively seek out."

The Clatsop Care Health District is looking to join a workforce coalition with Clark, Clackamas and Multnomah counties to figure out how to attract more people to the long-term care field.

The health district board has regularly approved wage increases, and Clatsop Care gives a few scholarships every academic term for students to become certified at Clatsop Community College in exchange for working at the center after graduation.

But these efforts to recruit and retain staff only go so far, especially with Columbia Memorial Hospital, Providence Seaside Hospital and other care settings nearby. "As the hospitals expand in this community, we're struggling to hire in this field," Williams said. "We're competing with the hospitals, and we don't pay as well as the hospitals."

The current pay for certified nursing assistants at Clatsop Care Center begins at less than \$12 an hour and goes up to more than \$15 an hour (the 2014 state median for direct care workers at nursing homes); their average wage at the center is about \$13. Clatsop Care Center also pays for all of the nurses' medical, dental and vision care.

According to a study conducted for the state Department of Human Services and published in January 2015, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics "estimates the need for an additional 1.3 million direct care worker positions between 2012 and 2022. The

nation, including Oregon, will have difficulty recruiting and retaining these workers unless working conditions — including wages and fringe benefits — are improved."

'Heartbroken'

At Saturday's well-attended meeting, Williams said the health district will continue working to recruit staff and ensure the remaining residents receive good care.

If Clatsop Care doesn't scale down, "the worst-case scenario is we will have to close, because we would risk losing our Medicaid license," she said. "We would risk losing our license for the building from the state, and that would be a problem."

The residents who leave the nursing home will be placed in proper care environments, Williams said.

"I'm from the community, so it's really hard, because I know a lot of these families. And, especially when we're taking care of their loved ones, you build that relationship with them. So it's gonna be difficult," she said.

After delivering the tough news, Williams and Brenchley received a sudden — and much appreciated — round of applause from the residents and their family members.

"I just want to say, the care's been beautiful," Ron Meyer, who has lived at the center for three years, told them. "Wonderful, as far as I'm concerned."

Mike Crow, a Hammond resident whose 89-year-old mother, Donna, has lived at Clatsop Care for about two years, said the center needs to find a way to raise wages.

"Somehow they gotta figure out how to get that

'So this building is a contributing factor in how costly it is to operate this business, and that is the reason why we are looking at a new, smaller facility.'

Nicole Williams
CEO at Clatsop Care Center

higher, to get the help that they need," he said.

Crow added that "they've done a great job" with his mother.

"I'm really kind of heartbroken that they have to decrease the number of residents because it's the only (nursing home) in the area," he said.

Brenchley knows how he feels.

"This is rough. This is an awful thing to go through," she said, "and I think it's a shame for our community. It's a shame for the residents we're serving, and it's sad for our staff to watch and go through."

Building for sale

The health district's board is looking to sell the Clatsop Care Center building and replace it with a new one in a separate location.

"We have been approached by one very interested person that wants to buy the building. We have been approached by others that are, I would say, semi-interested in buying the building," Williams said. "They are only conversations at this point."

If the district ends up selling the building, the district would seek to lease it from the buyer long enough to construct the new care center and transfer remaining residents.

"We do not want to have a gap in service for our residents," she said.

When the new building is up and running, "we estimate it'll save us about 30 percent in operational costs," she said.

Last year, Clatsop Care's elevators broke down and cost nearly \$100,000 to repair. She estimated that the building has between \$500,000 and \$800,000 in deferred maintenance and capital improvement costs.

"So this building is a contributing factor in how costly it is to operate this business, and that is the reason why we are looking at a new, smaller facility," Williams said.



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian
Seaside School District Superintendent Doug Dougherty and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden behind Seaside High School.

Wyden: He plans to take Seaside's message back to Washington, D.C.

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Most of Oregon's other coastal towns have some kind of elevation, Dougherty said, providing some protection.

Federal studies only plan for 38-foot tsunami waves, but studies by the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries found past tsunamis scaled 80 feet.

"If the federal government doesn't get the heights right, that's going to affect everything else," Wyden said. "As I understand it, Doug Dougherty is trying to plan for real world circumstances, not for some mythical figure."

Wyden, the ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, said he would seek predisaster and Federal Emergency Management Agency funds.

"What really needs to

improve is the judgments of members of Congress in terms of priorities, and that's my job," the Oregon Democrat said.

Wyden said he sees raising the issue of tsunami awareness as a national one.

"Seaside would be different than a small community in the Midwest or something on the East Coast," Wyden said. "Disasters are something where Congress comes together and says, 'We've got to come together in terms of preventative medicine.'"

Wyden said he plans to take Seaside's message back to Washington, D.C.

"There's nothing better than coming out and seeing something like this," Wyden said. "Otherwise you're just reading government reports and talking about this in the abstract."

Gearhart: City Council's decision could be appealed

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coming in met the conditions that were required," City Administrator Chad Sweet said. "The appeal is based on the fact that people think they did not meet those requirements and there may not be a need for this type of restaurant in town."

In March, planning commissioners voted 4-3 to OK the transition of Gearhart Grocery at 599 Pacific Way to a brew pub.

The city's comprehensive plan indicates stores in the city's central zone should "provide needed supporting services to the locals or residency community," opponents to the brew pub plan state in the appeal.

"It's tragic," Mark said. "It's a whole sensibility that's being dismissed. Once

it's gone, it's gone. You can't replace that."

The grocery is owned by Molly and Terry Lowenberg of Sum Properties in Seaside. In submissions to the Planning Commission, they told the city competition outside Gearhart made their business unprofitable. "Understandably people want to keep their market," Sweet said. "That withstanding, you can't force someone to keep a business that they don't want to continue to do."

The City Council has decided to hear the case on May 3 de novo, "which means all over again," Sweet said. "It's another opportunity for someone to make a different decision."

The decision of the council could be appealed to the state's Land Use Board of Appeals.

'It's tragic. It's a whole sensibility that's being dismissed.'

Jeanne Mark

one of those who signed the appeal to a Planning Commission decision to grant a conditional use permit to the brew pub

Bisping: Curriculum will be based on the Montessori method

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The center had been on the verge of closing before, in 2011, after years of losses, when it received an infusion from the city.

Despite a prestigious three-star rating early this year for its commitment to quality learning from Oregon's Quality Rating and Improvement System, the center shut its doors.

Bisping, who lives in Gearhart with her husband Brandon, a 16-month-old daughter and 12-year-old niece, suddenly found herself out of a job.

She developed a concept — Gearhart Kids Academy — a certified children's center offering infant, toddler, full-day and half-day programs for children six weeks to 12 years old.

Bisping secured a building on U.S. Highway 101 at the former site of North Coast Realty and took out a personal line of credit to finance her dream.

She said she sees a niche for the new center.

Curriculum will be based on the Montessori method and the Creative Curriculum for preschoolers.

"I don't really believe

in electronic toys," Bisping said. "I think there should be purposeful play, purposeful items. That's where the Montessori inspiration comes. It's very much arts, clay, bringing things outdoors inside. But there will be play, too, because that's important for social development."

Hours will be from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. "We hope to have kids going all

day long," she said.

Staffing at the new center came with some difficult choices.

There were four teachers at Cannon Beach Preschool, but "right now I can only take one of them, Susan James, who was there the longest, four years," Bisping said. "But my goal would be to take all four of them. They're all wonderful, so it's very hard."

Fees will be fixed and on a monthly basis — "very competitive to the other children's center that's in town, a little bit less," she said.

A Gearhart volunteer firefighter, Bisping will offer emergency medical service, fire and police families a 10 percent discount on tuition. Capacity will be 46. School starts May 2.

— R.J. Marx