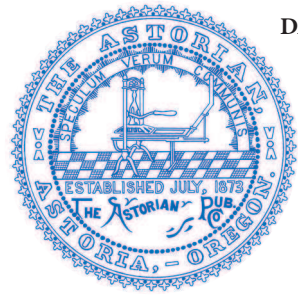


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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OUR VIEW

Needle exchange program is sensible

Although it's depressing to consider that we live in a time when opioid drug addiction is a familiar aspect of American life even in bucolic rural areas like ours, we can derive some encouragement from the fact Clatsop County commissioners and other public officials are receptive to creating a needle exchange program.

Regret about an ugly situation shouldn't get in the way of confronting it with every tool at our disposal.

The county's ability to take this sensible action was much aided by a \$50,000 donation from Friends of Columbia Community Health; all communities should be so lucky as to have such a nonprofit.

Although needle use here around the mouth of the Columbia is still tied in part to illicit use of methamphetamine, there's no doubt use of heroin and related opioid drugs has become entrenched in our towns — places where heroin was an alien concept merely 10 or 15 years ago.

Nationwide, deaths involving the use of the pain-relieving drugs have quadrupled since 1999, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC found the amount of painkillers prescribed during the year was enough for every American to be medicated around the clock for three weeks. While the spread of illicit forms of opioid drugs has a complex set of causes, many public health experts believe over-prescribing of pain drugs has created physical dependencies in people, a few of whom then turn to cheaper heroin.

Nationwide, opioids were involved in 33,091 fatal overdoses in 2015. Preliminary figures suggest a shocking increase to around 60,000 deaths in 2016. There are up to 2.6 million opioid addicts in the U.S. A federal report issued last week stated, "The opioid epidemic we are facing is unparalleled. The average American would likely be shocked to know that drug overdoses now kill more people than gun homicides and car crashes combined." This danger has been much increased in the past couple years by the addition of powerful synthetic pain drugs to the strength of street heroin.

The momentum of this health disaster swept up President Donald Trump this past week, who declaimed: "The opioid crisis is an emergency, and I'm saying officially right now it is an emergency. It's a national emergency. We're going to spend a lot of time, a lot of effort and a lot of money on the opioid crisis."

An emergency declaration will be beneficial, allowing officials at all levels to bypass some aspects of bureaucratic red tape that otherwise impedes sensible responses like the one in Clatsop County. Funds freed up by a presidential declaration should go toward addiction treatment and other forms of public-health intervention, and not be used to ramp up yet another failed "war on drugs" that sends addicts to prison. "We're not going to arrest our way out of this epidemic," a co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Drug Safety and Effectiveness told the Washington Post.

Emergency responders in our region have become increasingly used to the need to carry and administer the new fast-acting opiate-antidote naloxone. Administration of the antidote has become almost standard operating procedure in some circumstances, such as when the patient is unresponsive or there are other clues they may have overdosed. The actual antidote is inexpensive, but patented delivery systems make doses shockingly expensive. Congress and the president could make themselves useful by forcefully intervening in this situation that puts profits ahead of lives.

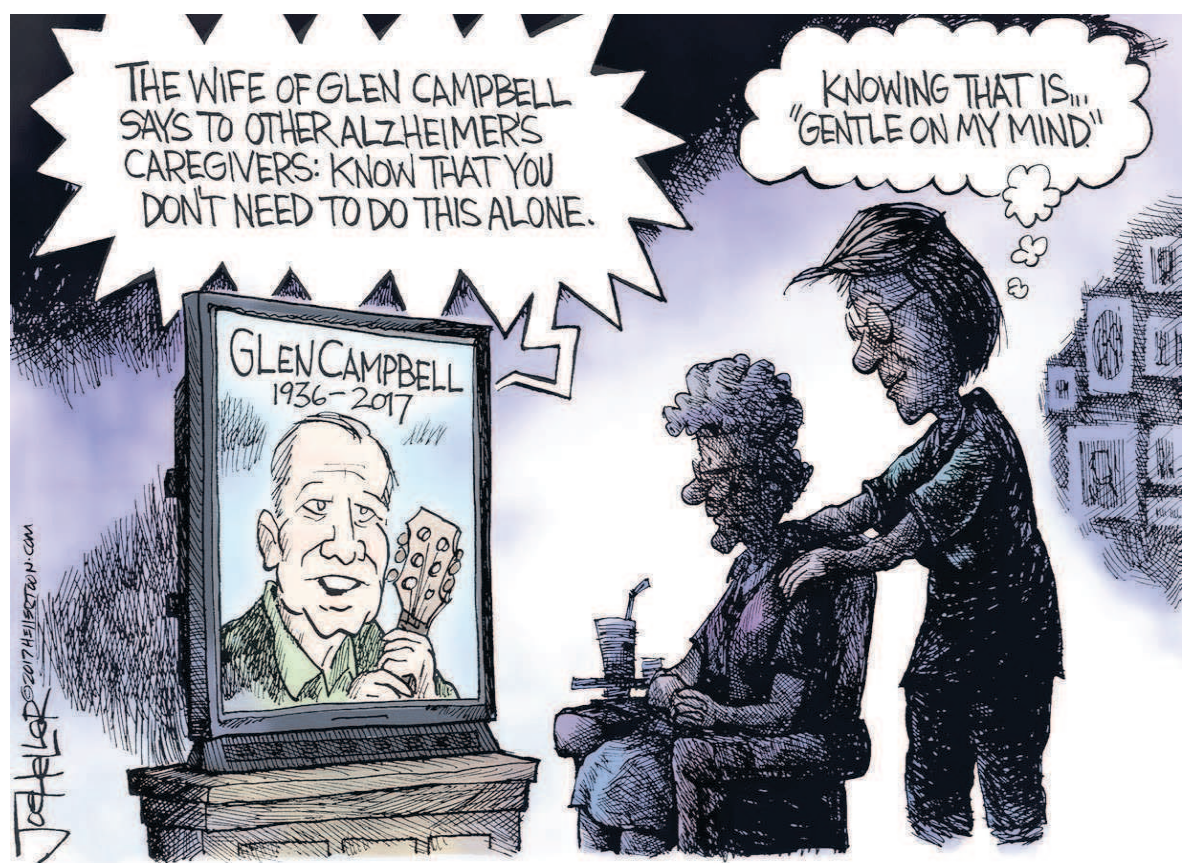
Steps like the needle exchange program stir some natural concerns in the law enforcement community. Such exchanges are a compassionate way to stem the spread of blood-borne diseases, while building points of contact between addicts and health providers that can help lead to recovery and overdose avoidance. But, clearly, compassion should be tempered by the need to avoid creating an attractive nuisance that draws more criminal behavior to particular neighborhoods or communities. Enlightened policies can't be permitted to become a slippery slope to "anything goes."

Law enforcement and prosecutors will best spend their time by pursuing major dealers and distribution networks.

There's no doubt that heroin and its prescription-drug siblings are exacting a terrible toll on our communities. Every premature death and life squandered in addiction is deeply regrettable. Society's heroin junkie is someone's son, daughter, mother, father, brother, sister.

This is a crisis worthy of everyone's attention.

Exchanges are a compassionate way to stem the spread of blood-borne diseases, while building points of contact between addicts and health providers.



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

An interview with the chief

By R.J. MARX
The Daily Astorian

Cannon Beach Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn is a model of community law enforcement. A former Seaside Police officer, Schermerhorn was selected as Cannon Beach chief in 2012 out of a field of 40 candidates.



His involvement with citizens and the community — be it as emergency preparedness leader, volunteer firefighter, Rotary member, participant in "Shop with a Cop" and "National Night Out" or mentor for youth — is visible. He is vocal and available for residents as a go-to for those in need.

His latest role is an interim one, filling in for former City Manager Brant Kucera, who left to take a similar job in the city of Sisters. We caught up with Schermerhorn at his office at police headquarters.

Q: So much is going on with you in this dual role of police chief and city manager. Is it doable?

A: It is doable. The great thing with Cannon Beach is that we have great employees. In the last three weeks, there have been times when each of the department heads have been gone and their crews just pick up after them and do what they need to do.

Of course I am biased, but it is great for me to step away from the police department and have everything still going smoothly here. Everybody down the line does a great job.

Q: What are the big issues you are addressing?

A: As city manager, we have a new building official. The charter school is the big thing now. We are working with the academy on building permits. There are a lot of things that keep popping up. They're on a time crunch to get ready.

Q: Do you see timed parking as inevitable here?

A: I don't know. It was all based on the survey for the strategic plan, and that was one of the solutions that came up. It never hurts to try something, but the hard thing with that was, it was a rush. That upset the citizenry as well as the business owners because they said, "We want some involvement in this." That's always important.

Q: In the past years I have seen you go through some extraordinary tragedies. The killing of a 2-year-old and attack on her 13-year-old sister, Alana, by Jessica Smith in 2014; and the death of your friend, Seaside Police Sgt. Jason Gooding, shot by Phillip Max Ferry in February 2016. You have been through more in three years than most cops go through in a lifetime. Talk to me about that.

A: You are right. It has been a career of dealing with different tragedies. The last three years have been very extreme. That's where it falls down on your co-workers, and your family and your friends, being able to have that and separating yourself from the events. I think dealing with the homicide and Alana was very difficult for me, because the children were around my kids' ages. You personalize that and put yourself in that situation.

Q: How did you cope?

A: ... Cannon Beach is such a great town in dealing with those things.

We got so much assistance from our citizens here and our council. Our different department heads



The Daily Astorian/File Photo
Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn serves up burgers at "Burger with a Cop" in June 2015. With him are family members Jennifer, Jackson and Jasmine Schermerhorn.



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian
Chief Jason Schermerhorn at his office in police headquarters.

were very helpful and gracious in working with us. That was great.

But also working with the other agencies, when you're looking at that homicide and Jason's homicide, the amount of support was amazing. That was a great resource for us. It's really something.

I think about Jason every day. Just quirks and things that he does and his daughter J.J. — Jayden is my daughter's best friend. She is my daughter's age, and she is the spitting image of her dad.

Jason was my first recruit in Seaside. When he first came in he was assigned to me first. We were very close. We helped them move down into town. Our kids have grown up together and my wife and Amy (Gooding) have been very close.

All those memories were good memories. And what a great officer he was.

Those are the things that I think about, the positive things.

Q: Has it affected the way you approach your duties?

A: Absolutely. You always have that police paranoia when you are dealing with different things, whether it's a traffic stop or other things. You get those situations where the hair kind of jumps up on the back of your neck.

Phil Ferry was somebody I had dealt with many, many times when I was in Seaside and on the drug task force where we had fought with him and he didn't have a gun. He had physically fought with us and resisted arrest, but we had not contacted him with a firearm before. That just shows you how easily available weapons are for people.

Q: I know in a very general sense there is a concern about crime in rural parts of our county.

A: There are certainly locals distributing drugs and using drugs. When I was on the drug task force,

we had the highest amount of drugs per capita in the state of Oregon, based on our county and the population. So much of it is going back and forth from rural areas.

You also have Highway 101 which stretches from Canada to Mexico. People do not want to go the I-5 route because they know there is more law enforcement out there, bigger agencies. They think they can take this back highway here and they'll be free. That's what's great about having (Gunner) the canine here. We've had that 3 1/2, four years. He is a great tool to have out there.

Q: What would you say is the police department's biggest need right now?

A: That is a good question. Right now we are trying to fill one of our positions. We lost (Sgt.) Josh (Gregory) to Seaside. Filling that position is probably our biggest need, just for manpower. It's hard on officers. They're working longer hours. They're covering shifts. That's what's harder with me splitting both roles. It takes me out of the equation. I'll cover when I can, but it doesn't open me up to working a whole lot of extra hours.

Q: The city of Cannon Beach has a reputation of being far ahead of many other cities for tsunami and emergency preparedness.

A: We have a great CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) program. We have 42 CERT members now and 21 Medical Reserve Corps members and we've recently added Red Cross in the last six months. We're moving forward in building shelters.

It's really good. But we still have a lot of work to do. A lot of that will be our South Wind project, of adding a shelter down there and getting funding for it. That is something our emergency management consultant Stacy (Burr) is working on and will be bringing to the council in the next few months to get us started so we can get federal funding. We need to have a shelter up there so we can begin getting grant money.

Q: How can the community provide you with what you need to do your job better?

A: Just showing support. They're doing that. They've gone above and beyond. I think we're going to do another round to raise money for the canine. Those are ways they can show it. Also by thanking the officers when they see them and helping out when they can.

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian's South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.