

Washington governor proposes plans to fix mental health

New focus on prevention

By MARTHA BELLISLE
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee unveiled on Tuesday his budget and policy plans for fixing the state’s struggling mental health system in the coming years.

Inslee said at a news conference in Burien that he wants to change the system from being “crisis-based” to one that focuses on prevention by providing mental health care to more people.

“There’s too long of a line of people trying to get

into the mental health system,” he said.

The governor reiterated his plan to move mental health care away from large institutions to smaller community-based centers. He proposes opening housing in communities so that people can be treated in centers that are closer to their families.

“I am very confident that we can get this job done,” Inslee said. “We know what works. We know how to fix this problem.”

Inslee said he wanted to invest in the troubled Western State Hospital to address safety concerns there, but he didn’t mention the rise in assaults at the state’s largest psychiatric hospital.



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren
Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, center, spoke last May in front of Western State Hospital in Lakewood, Wash.

A recent Associated Press investigation found that attacks by patients on staff and other patients has been

increasing in recent years. The 850-plus bed facility in Lakewood also lost its certification by the Cen-

ters for Medicare and Medicaid Services and federal funding after it repeatedly failed health and safety inspections.

Workers at the hospital have said that they’re in crisis mode and fear for their safety as they go into work each day. Nurses, counselors and others who care for patients must work an unhealthy and unsafe amount of overtime to keep the wards staffed, they say.

Inslee said there was a critical shortage in mental health workers across the state, and his remedy would be to provide scholarships for people interested in pursuing a career in that area.

His written plan calls for \$56 million for infrastructure at Western and Eastern state hospitals. It doesn’t mention an increase in staffing, which is what workers want.

The governor hopes to eventually move many of the civil commitment patients to community-based centers and reserve beds in Western State for forensic patients who are held through the criminal justice system.

He said they would need to talk with communities that are targeted to house some of the civilly committed patients.

They need to understand, he said, that “all of us can be touched by mental health.”

Audit finds Oregon keeps vital opioid information under wraps

The state program has little teeth

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon is collecting valuable information about opioid prescribers and their patients but state law hamstrings using the system to confront drug abuse, state auditors said Tuesday.

Oregon, like all other states, collects information on prescriptions for controlled substances like Oxycodone and Percocet.

But Oregon’s program has little teeth, auditors found.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian
The state hopes to improve a drug monitoring program to help combat drug abuse.

Underreported

While deaths due to prescription opioids have declined 45 percent since a peak in 2006, about one Oregonian dies from an opioid overdose every three days, auditors said. Some research suggests that deaths from prescription opioids are underreported by 20 to 35 percent.

In March, Gov. Kate Brown declared addiction a public health crisis.

In the face of such problems, prescription monitoring could provide Oregon a wealth of information about how opioids are prescribed and dispensed and more tools to prevent abuse.

It can help the state catch patterns like doctors who overprescribe, pharmacists who dispense “excessive quantities” of opioids and problems like “doctor shopping,” where a patient goes to different doctors to get multiple prescriptions.

But in Oregon, even if the state finds “egregious” examples of questionable prescribing habits, the information can’t be shared with regulatory or enforcement agencies that could investigate, auditors said.

Oregon is one of nine states that don’t make prescribers or pharmacies use drug monitoring databases to check patient histories before prescribing certain drugs.

And although prescribers are required to register with the monitoring program, only about 77 percent of prescribers have done so, auditors found. There are no repercussions in state rules for prescribers who don’t register, auditors said.

This year, a new state committee reviewed prescribers’ histories for high-volume prescribers and other warning signs.

That group identified

160 medical professionals in Oregon with suspicious prescribing patterns and reached out to them with letters suggesting more training or education. The professionals had no obligation to take the advice or to even respond, auditors said.

And the committee that detects suspicious patterns can’t share its findings with state health licensing boards.

Police also have limited access to the information, available only with a warrant as part of a drug investigation.

The state’s licensed pharmacists and prescribers fund the prescription database through annual fees totaling about \$800,000 per year.

Red flags

State auditors found red flags in the state’s database.

Reviewing three years of information, auditors found 148 people who each received controlled substance prescriptions from 30 or more providers and filled their prescriptions at 15 or more pharmacies.

In comparison, auditors said, the average patient in Oregon gets prescriptions from two providers and two pharmacies.

Auditors recommended changing state law to allow the drug monitoring program to analyze data on prescriber, pharmacy and patient practices, and to share those results with licensing boards and police.

Catch limits increase for key West Coast groundfish species

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — Federal officials said Tuesday they are increasing catch limits for several species of West Coast groundfish that were severely depleted more than a dozen years ago, posing a threat to the commercial and sports fishing industries.

Limits for yelloweye rockfish will more than double, while substantial increases will be allowed for California scorpionfish, bocaccio and Pacific Ocean perch, the National Marine Fisheries Service said.

Those species have recovered enough to allow for the greatest expansion of a West Coast fishery in years. The formal announcement of the revised catch limits will be published today and the changes go into effect on Jan. 1, the first day of the new fishing season.

allow us to go to 30 fathoms or 40 fathoms or all depths, it’ll allow the fleet to spread out.”

Between 1999 and 2002, nine West Coast groundfish stocks were declared overfished as surveys documented declining numbers.

Because more than 90 total groundfish species share the same habitat, anglers fishing for a permitted species risked also catching restricted fish and exceeding the overall limit — a mistake that could mean an end to the fishing season for that particular species. The limits devastated the fishing industry along the West Coast. Many businesses went under and tensions between the industry and federal regulators ran high for years.

“Back then, one boat could catch all the quota

for one species in one day,” said Jason Cope, a research fisheries biologist at the National Marine Fisheries Service. “There was a lot of avoidance, a lot of places you couldn’t go and probably a lot of paranoia. It was a lot of kind of walking on eggshells.”

Improved population numbers mean there’s now a buffer for such mistakes and anglers can go to places they haven’t fished in years without as much worry, he said.

Key to these changes is the recovery of the yelloweye rockfish, one of several species of rock fish that were

in trouble just 15 years ago.

The combined annual catch limit for the yelloweye will increase from 20 metric tons to 48 metric tons in 2019, although regulators could begin to make adjustments to fishing restrictions when the catch approaches 39 metric tons to allow room for error.

Anglers will be able to fish at greater depths and in locations that were previously off-limits. One immediate effect will see fewer fishing boats crowded near the shore where anglers were less likely to net the overfished species.

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