

OPINION

the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

GUEST COLUMN

Frustration builds on unemployment claims

State Rep. Andrea Salinas was livid. She was discussing the Oregon Employment Department’s computer system, which continues to stymie thousands of out-of-work individuals from receiving timely unemployment benefits related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet since 2009, Salinas said, the department has had money to upgrade its Stone Age technology.

The agency was unprepared — in technology, staffing and procedures — for the flood of unemployment applications that began in mid-March.

“This is ridiculous. I have people in my district who’ve been waiting 11 weeks,” Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, told constituents during a town hall this month. “I know my family could not survive 11 weeks without a paycheck. So I am very angry.”

She suggested the agency management became gun-shy from seeing the Cover Oregon debacle, adding, “We have to figure out how we in this state can do IT systems better. This is ridiculous.”

Oregon DMV did announce this month that it successfully completed replacement of its 1960s and ’70s computer systems.

But the Employment Department snafus were a hot topic at the virtual town hall with state Senate Democratic Leader Rob Wagner, Lake Oswego; Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn; and Salinas.

“We talk about bipartisanship. Well, there is bipartisan frustration with what’s happened with the Employment Department,” Wagner said.

Some lawmakers are disappointed that the Legislature, during its three-day special session last month, did nothing to rectify the situation. For a variety of reasons, Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, said she would rate the session as a 5 on a 1-to-10 scale.



The Oregon Employment Department has had difficulty keeping up with claims during the coronavirus pandemic.

After the special session, Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, said the unemployment situation was not discussed much beforehand.

“That is one of the policy issues we might get into in the next (special) session,” Courtney said. “Once we got into police accountability, that dominated everything.”

However, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said the Legislature could do little because federal regulations control the unemployment system. “There wasn’t anything we could do

statutorily to make that better,” Kotek said. “I think it’s a process issue. It’s an administrative implementation issue.”

With another special session pending, I asked the new head of the Employment Department what the Legislature could do.

“We’ve been talking to legislators a lot,” Acting Director David Gerstenfeld said. “They’ve been very helpful in terms of helping us identify trends and to provide that kind of front-line service to people that are seeking benefits.”

There has been discussion about small policy changes “that might make, frankly, minor differences in how we’re able to handle it,” Gerstenfeld said.

“There really isn’t a magic legislative fix that would let us quickly go through

the claims much more rapidly. If there was, whether we had thought of it or anybody else, we certainly would be advocating actively. And everything that we’re hearing from the Legislature is that they certainly would be supportive of anything that we can do to get benefits to people more quickly.”

Kotek and Courtney proposed that the state give \$500 checks to Oregonians who have applied for unemployment but not received benefits. Last week, the Legislative Emergency Board, which the presiding officers co-chair, approved a maximum of \$35 million for an estimated 70,000 claimants.

Meanwhile, Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, citing “four months of frustration with a state agency that seems incapable of meeting their obligations to working Oregonians,” has asked Secretary of State Bev Clarno to audit the Employment Department. He wants state auditors to evaluate:

- The status of the federal money intended for the computer system upgrade,
- “The efficacy of job assignments and wasted time while employees wait for direction from leadership,”
- “The phone systems and procedures to avoid multihour hold times for customers only to be disconnected at the end of the waiting period,”
- “Other states’ approaches in resolving PUA (Pandemic Unemployment Assistance) backlogs while ensuring timely payments of all other claims,” and,
- “The need for an ‘express lane’ or ‘priority pass’ for those who waited, only to be denied and then told to go to the back of the PUA line.”

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A COVID war

In the 1950s we had a Cold War. Now, we have a COVID war. When my generation was instructed to protect ourselves against nuclear attack, we hid underneath our school desks. Now we are advised to wear masks and practice “anti” social distancing.

Still, the refrain from those days resonates in my head, but with a little brevity: “Meeska-mooska Mouse-cateers, mask cartoon time now is here.” Please teach your children that the world is constantly changing. And they must adapt.

ROBERT POTTER
Astoria

Do your job

Open letter to the Astoria City Council: Developer Mark Hollander spent an absolute fortune fighting to tie up the former Ship Inn restaurant property for a future four-story hotel.

When the council granted him the permit, you told your citizens that the council’s hands were tied, and you had no choice, because his plan fell within the zoning ordinance for the property. Does the zoning ordinance have anything to say about leaving a property looking abandoned, and a blight on the face of the city, for month after month and year after year?

Council, do your job, stand up to his powerhouse lawyers and get this property cleaned up, and get a great big cash deposit — not a bond — that you can access to make sure it remains presentable until the Tower of Fairfield is completed ... if ever.

Astoria has had plenty of big spenders letting property go to you know where. Enough is enough.

LARRY ALLEN
Astoria

Thank you

A great big thank you to Robert Dorn of Hyak Maritime, and all the other business owners, who generously and thoughtfully provided our local Independence Day fireworks show. And thanks also to our mayor, for his cooperation in the project.

My wife and I truly enjoyed wrapping up the Fourth of July viewing this very traditional way of celebrating the birth of our great nation. We have enjoyed traveling internationally, but are grateful to call the U.S. our home, and to be living in Astoria for her birthday celebration.

JOHN SLIVKOFF
Astoria

Unfair burden

I have lived in Astoria since 2006. Recently, a close friend has experienced

several psychotic episodes. In that particular case, the response of the Astoria Police Department has been more effective than that of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

The reason is both clear and simple: CBH is underfunded and understaffed. Furthermore, none of the local hospitals has any inpatient psychiatric beds. I don’t believe there is a psychiatrist resident and practicing in Clatsop County.

The bottom line is that the principal resources for mental health services in Clatsop County are law enforcement and the local hospitals’ emergency rooms. All this puts an unfair burden on law enforcement and hospital emergency room staff.

CBH, whose mission is “... (to improve) the quality of life for people whose lives are affected by mental health, addictions, and developmental disabilities,” cannot do what it has committed to do, and wants to do, because the county has simply not provided the funds for them

to do so.

The Clatsop County commissioners can fix this problem, and thereby alleviate the burdens on law enforcement and the local hospitals’ emergency rooms, by properly funding CBH. Eugene has addressed this situation by dedicating a medi-van, staffed by a medic and a clinician, which gets called out by 911 dispatch 24/7.

We need to do something like this to help our community, and to relieve the burdens on the good and brave people in law enforcement and health care who are serving on the front lines of the current pandemic.

BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria

Unexpected kindness

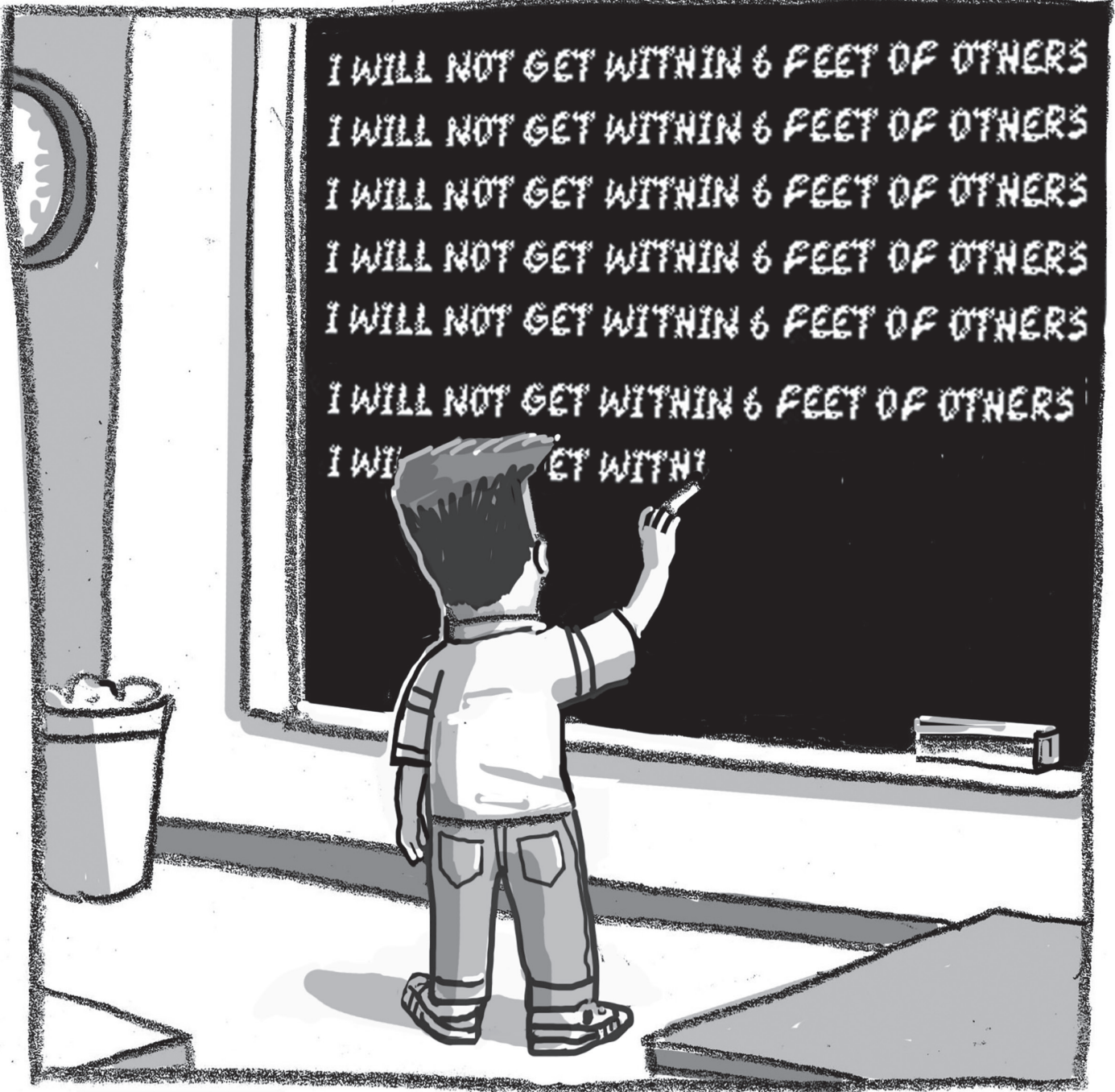
Recently, it was a crazy day, with news of two friends hospitalized with ail-

ments unrelated to COVID-19, and then hearing the reports of surges throughout the Southern states, increased difficulty in getting test results, the push to have schools opened during these uncertain times and some states and cities having to close down or pull back on business openings, etc. It just seemed to be one thing after another.

But then there was some good news. I needed some sneakers, so I called Gimre’s Shoes to reorder a similar style that I have gotten before, and asked them to send them to me. Peter Gimre found the style, and took all my information to complete the order. He even offered to drop them off, since my place was on his way home.

Unexpected kindness during these tough times sure helped make the day better. Shop local and support our town.

DEBORAH MORGAN
Astoria



KUPER