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

The checks are not in the mail

This has been a week of bad news, worse news and occasional good news in Oregon government. But instead of recounting all those downs, ups and sideways, let's check in on a continuing issue: unemployment.

Oregon's unemployment compensation system mirrors the nation's — a disgrace. Many jobless Oregonians have been waiting for months for promised payments during the coronavirus pandemic. The fact that other states are equally messed up is no consolation and should be no excuse for Oregon.

DICK HUGHES

On the other hand, Oregon households and local economies would be in far worse shape without the more than $3.6 billion that has been paid in unemployment claims since March 15, the week that Gov. Kate Brown first issued stay-home orders and restricted business operations.

The Oregon Employment Department now has more than 1,000 workers processing unemployment claims, compared with 100 in mid-March when the avalanche of pandemic-related unemployment claims began. The department has made substantial progress under Acting Director David Gerstenfeld, individual employees have made herculean efforts — according to my sources — and the agency gradually has found faster ways to process claims.

Gerstenfeld deserves credit for being accessible, holding weekly press briefings via teleconference.

Yet the department's prime metric for measuring improvement — number of claims processed — is irrelevant to everyday Oregonians. Last week, Gerstenfeld announced that the agency was ahead of its self-imposed schedule and had completed processing 70,000 initial claims for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.

Here's the rub: Initial processing is a major step but only the first one. It doesn't mean checks are on their way to jobless Oregonians.

The better metrics would be the number of unresolved claims — which apparently remain in the tens of thousands — and how long people have been waiting for payments.

The department creates extra work for itself because frustrated Oregonians must try multiple ways to get answers to their questions: calling; emailing, although that system has been shut down after being swamped with more than 280,000 emails; sending old-fashioned mail; using the new online "Contact Us" form; and contacting their legislators for assistance. Many phone lines have been added, but they're still jammed. The average 37-minute wait time on the phone is a joke because many callers only get busy signals.

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted life for businesses and workers.

My suggestion is to contact your legislator for help, as state House Speaker Tina Kotek and other lawmakers have suggested, although last week Gerstenfeld seemed to downplay that. He is asking Oregonians to primarily use the online contact form.

It seems the department lacks a culture of outside-the-box thinking and a management attitude of, "Do whatever it takes. Just fix it. Now."

Meanwhile, the agency continues sending confusing letters to claimants. A Salem resident reported receiving 18 letters in one week — but still no payments.

I asked Gerstenfeld about the form letters, which might be applicable to some traditional unemployment situations but rarely to the new Pandemic Unemployment Assistance for gig workers and others. He said the computer system automatically sends the letters when it notices something that would prevent a benefit payment.

"Rather than having our experts change the programming that would be needed to stop or to change those notices, they've been working constantly on implementing these new benefit programs; and then they'll be shifting to any new federal programs that's created in the waiting week," Gerstenfeld said. "I'll apologize for that. I know that that causes confusion and it's not ideal."

I wonder how much money is being wasted on envelopes, paper and postage. Even more, I wonder why there isn't a prolific public relations campaign: "Please ignore all letters you receive from the Oregon Employment Department unless … ." In the meantime, those confusing notices add to the stress of unemployed Oregonians.

The department has taken some common-sense steps and discerned how to get money to some people faster. Why did it take so long? What more can be done?

The department feels encumbered both by past practices and by the federal unemployment regulations. Except in extreme times like these, that's the approach the public wants.

Government agencies generally are risk averse. Professional reputations and taxpayer dollars are at stake. The public and political ramifications of failure are severe. Front-page headlines await those who royally mess up. Yet great managers welcome outside-the-box thinking instead of fearing the results. Such managers balance a certain level of risk with the potential outcomes, instead of comfortably staying in the status quo.

It's the job of CEOs — the governor for state agencies, county commissioners for county departments, etc. — to recruit, hire and retain such executives. Too often, it's easier to hire someone who checks the right boxes, fits the party line and (to mix my metaphors) won't rock the government boat. Could this be why questionable leadership has plagued the Oregon Employment Department for years?

Amid the unresolved backlog of unemployment claims this spring, Gov. Brown finally ousted director Kay Erickson, whom Brown had appointed in 2016. Brown was pushed into action by Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, Congressman Peter DeFazio, state legislators and others.

As for the future, all this raises the question of whether the department should proceed with its computer modernization or take a reset with far greater public involvement.

New technology desperately is needed. That's obvious. But past information technology improvements were bungled. With the residue of the Cover Oregon fiasco hanging over the state, the department let millions of federal moderation dollars sit unspent.

Even in good times, the feds and Oregon considered it acceptable for claimants to wait three weeks to receive benefits. That is heartless. Yet today some people have been waiting three months.

A new technology system must be flexible in the ways that the agency's 1993-era mainframe system is not. America's and Oregon's unemployment systems were built for an old-style economy and were based on social norms of nearly 90 years ago. Wyden is among those pushing Congress to modernize the rules, including making permanent the availability of jobless benefits for out-of-work gig workers. Oregon's technology must be nimbly responsive to such changes, and to treating claimants with humanity.

Although the unemployment mess is a critical issue for Oregonians, legislators apparently don't have a handle on how to rectify it. Lawmakers already are divided on what to take up in the special session. Tempers were flaring during last week's committee hearings.

It's also been a month since Kotek, D-Portland, and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, said they wanted the state to immediately issue "emergency relief checks of $500 per person for Oregonians who have applied for unemployment benefits and have not yet received their benefits from the Oregon Employment Department."

The checks are not in the mail.

Really.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

New logo

Clatsop Community Action is looking for a new logo, and we need your help.

Our community is full of amazing, talented artists who are as diverse as the county we live in. We need your help to create a new logo that's inclusive of the county we call home. What better way to show your community spirit and pride than by taking part in helping CCA to rebrand our logo?

The ideal logo will speak to our mission, which is to help people meet housing, food and other basic needs. We are looking for a logo that encompasses the heart of Clatsop County, and speaks to the services we provide.

We believe housing is a basic human right, and we strive to make sure our clients have the resources they need to be successful and sustainable.

Please submit your logo ideas to vmatthews@ccaservices.org by Aug. 30.

VIVIANA MATTHEWS
Executive director,
Clatsop Community Action
Astoria

Something wonderful

Something wonderful happened. COVID-19 is striking a blow to many, and Trail's End Art Association was no different. But due to generous help, we were able to find resources to complete a five-year renovation of the building in time for our 70th anniversary this year.

This unassuming building housing the association has quietly watched the history of Gearhart unfold before it for over 117 years. It has witnessed the halcyon years, when old Gearhart downtown thrived with summer families, hotels, carnivals and county fairs.

It survived the arson fires that wiped out downtown in the early 1900s, and moved to its present location. It has also seen generations of kids in Gearhart, and originally acted as an additional classroom and gym for the oldest Gearhart school.

Through the help of the Oregon Cultural Trust, the city of Gearhart and generous donors, it was completed with a historical renovation by John Davies Construction. With additional help from Clatsop County Cultural Coalition, we have been promoting our 70th anniversary and the building.

In gratitude, we recommend making a donation to an arts, heritage or humanities organization, and then match that amount with the cultural trust for a full tax credit — receiving a full return of your investment in state taxes.

The community is welcome to tour the building — and see the gallery art show, along with Gearhart's work in progress to develop the Centennial Park in the meadow outside the building — from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday through Sunday at 656 A St.

KITTY PAINO
President, Trail's End Art Association
Astoria

Power and genocide

During Joseph Stalin's reign, he purposely starved and murdered millions of his countrymen to achieve power and maintain control, and yet the Russian people revere him as their greatest leader. Withholding supplies necessary for survival is used by most despots, which brings to mind President Donald Trump.

I've tried to understand why he has consistently downplayed the danger of COVID-19 and continues to obfuscate efforts to coordinate its containment. Until recently, he refused to wear a mask, and instead held rallies where the participants took little or no precautions, with his encouragement.

He pushed everyone into reopening despite the lack of control over the pandemic, only to see the horrific, yet predictable, resurgence of new cases, with no plan except to send kids back to school. This will guarantee the proliferation of asymptomatic carriers, who will bring death to those desperately trying to hide from this killer virus.

One senator called this malfeasance and dereliction of duty, but it's closer to genocide. It's hard not to get the impression Trump wants to infect as many people as possible, while claiming it's all under control and that 99% of the time, the virus is harmless.

This is the kind of madness exhibited by Adolph Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong and others, who used lies to distract and cover their murderous, unbridled lust for power and control. No matter how you spin it, Trump is responsible for the needless deaths of thousands through omission and misdirection. What a monstrous betrayal.

BRENTON KAHLE
Astoria

Vote him out

Two hundred and forty-four years ago, the founders of this nation — a democratic federation of individual states — issued a Declaration of Independence, which cited the gross abuses of power by a monarch.

Thirteen years later, those same founders wrote a Constitution, designed to implement a set of principles that they believed would guarantee that such a monarch would never again be able to exercise the abuses of power that had led to a bloody war. Citizens of the now United States of America could forever live free in a country dedicated to preserving their life and liberty, and providing a foundation for their individual and collective pursuit of happiness.

The monarch in 1776 was King George III, a man universally acknowledged to suffer from severe mental illness, first recurrent, then permanent. Today, the president of these United States, formed as a democratic republic dedicated to the ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all its citizens, daily thwarts those who attempt to maintain those ideals.

Most recently, he has used nefarious means to undermine fair and free elections and the accurate counting of all those living in our country, which is the basis for the election of representatives who serve in Congress.

Once again we, as citizens, are called upon to rise up against this would-be monarch and ride him out of town on a rail. For the sake of our democratic principles, for which thousands of fellow citizens have died in battle, vote him out.

BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria