

OPINION



the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
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CARL EARL
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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘It’s really important to see the humanity’

Clatsop County has seen a spike of people in mental health crisis during the coronavirus pandemic. Social and political unrest across the United States and deadly wildfires in Oregon have also fueled anxiety.

“My hope for this whole experience with the pandemic and social unrest and all of that, is that we learn more about our mental health,” said Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county’s mental health contractor. “That we don’t take it for granted. We don’t think it’s something that happens to somebody else.

“And that we recognize that it’s something that contributes to our life. It’s as important as physical health and we have to nurture and take care of it in order to have it.”

Baker took over Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare after leadership turmoil in 2016 and has had her own turbulent experiences trying to steer the private nonprofit toward more productive ground.

In an interview, Baker talked about ways people can cope, the obstacles to crisis response and whether the country has ever prioritized mental health.

Q: We’re in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, social and political unrest and devastating wildfires. Are you seeing an increase in people experiencing mental health challenges?

A: Yes. We’re certainly seeing it at a local level with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, but I don’t think we’re alone.

The Kaiser Family Foundation just did a nationwide poll and found that 53% of the respondents described that their mental health is negatively impacted at this time. So it’s not unique to this county. It’s certainly something that we’re experiencing nationwide.

But we have definitely seen an increase in both crises and, to some extent, the severity of the crises.

Q: How does that play out, in terms of the type of mental health challenges?

A: Let me start with why I think this is happening right now.

The human brain is not really wired to address chronic, long-term stress. And it’s not just been one situation, it’s been multiple. And I think what we’re seeing is that a lot of folks are kind of hitting the wall with what they can tolerate in terms



Amy Baker is the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

of chronic stress.

What that ends up looking like is people feeling increased feelings of depression and anxiety. I know that our staff are experiencing it. I know that our clients are experiencing it. I know that my family and friends are experiencing it.

It feels like it’s pretty universal at this point.

Q: What is your advice to help people cope?

A: Everybody copes differently. I want to start with that — that there’s not one right answer. The advice that I have is not just from my perspective, but also others that I’ve been reading and following.

I think the first thing is we have to acknowledge how we’re feeling, how we’re doing. A lot of times people don’t want to do that because they feel like there’s something wrong with them. And that’s not true, this is a really common, common experience when you’ve just had like seven months of high stress.

For some folks, there’s a lot of grief and loss. There’s loss around lost businesses, lost homes, loved ones. And then, for others, it’s a lost sense of safety. For others, it’s a little bit more ambiguous because it’s been this loss of routine and structure. The ways in which we typically get recharged aren’t necessarily available to us.

So, starting with acknowledging feelings, and, I think, finding ways to recharge and reenergize ourselves. Whatever that looks like for you.

I think it’s really important to see the humanity in each other. This environment is so polarizing that we lose sense of each other’s humanity, and I don’t think that’s helpful.

Q: For the past two years, a mobile crisis team has been available to help police deal with people in mental health crisis. Is that process working effectively?

A: The state increased our funding and we did it to the degree of what was required of us, and to what the funding was. And I think when we’re able to intervene in a mental health crisis, I think it’s pretty effective.

You always want people who are trained in mental health to deal with people who are having a mental health crisis. Our roles are so different with law enforcement. Law enforcement tries to create, like, order out of chaos.

In the situation of a mental health clinician, you can go sit down on the sidewalk with somebody and just have a conversation. So when we’re able to respond, I think it’s super effective.

But, to be fair, we have one crisis clinician who’s covering the entire county, plus a program manager, during business hours, which makes us less available than what I think we should be.

Q: In April, a Warrenton man who had mental health and drug abuse issues died in police custody. Do you see an expanded role for mental health experts in responding to emergency

calls?

A: I can’t speak to that situation, because I’m just not familiar enough with exactly what happened.

But what I can say is kind of what I just said a minute ago, is that often when people are having mental health crises, they’re scared, they’re confused, they’re distressed. And the way that we approach people in those situations is that we make ourselves very small and very nonthreatening, because you want to get the person to kind of like settle down so that you can help problem-solve and assess exactly what’s happening.

I do think that we have a role in those situations. We have two years of experience now where we know when we do intervene, it works.

It’s just a matter of making it more accessible, so that it’s never a question in law enforcement’s mind that we would be available when they need us.

Q: We consistently hear that there is a lack of resources to effectively deal with mental health and drug and alcohol abuse on the North Coast. Is this a state issue? A federal issue? When can we expect to see more progress?

A: I don’t think this country has ever prioritized mental health.

Programs such as Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare were created in 1963 because of the Community Mental Health Act that was passed by the Kennedy administration. And from the very get-go it was underfunded.

I think that what’s happened over the years is the funding has waxed and waned depending on the administration. There’s been boutique projects that get funded along the way. But there’s never been a systemic look at what is it that we want to accomplish and how do we get there, particularly across all the different funding streams.

I think that, as a country, we are way more willing to punish people than to help them. And if we want to take a different approach, then we have to look at how we’re funding these resources.

If I added 10 crisis clinicians to the team, that would make a huge difference in terms of our response. But then it doesn’t help with the fact that we don’t have places for people to live. So this is bigger than mobile crisis, and I think it is going to take a matter of reprioritization from both the state and federal perspective.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

GUEST COLUMN

Gun measure will create confusion and danger

Most of us who live in Clatsop County, no matter what we look like or how much money we have, want our families to feel safe here. When we feel safe, we can make the connections in our schools, work, sports and other activities that lead to a sense of community and well-being.

On the November ballot is a measure that asks voters to decide if Clatsop County should be allowed to enforce existing gun laws. A “yes” vote on Measure 4-205 means county employees, including the sheriff and his deputies, could be fined \$2,000 and sued (yes, sued!) for enforcing federal, state and local laws.

Why would we want to endanger their lives — and ours — by preventing law enforcement in situations where there is no court order from trying to disarm a suspect or take guns from people in a domestic violence situation? And they wouldn’t be able to request a court order. How will the sheriff and his deputies protect us and themselves if in situations where there is no court order they disarm someone who’s displaying threatening behavior on the street, for example, or who is drunk or on drugs?

Measure 4-205 would also prevent the sheriff and county crime investigators from tracking down guns to find out if they were used in a crime. The county would not be able to enforce any background checks for the sale of any guns, including semi-automatic weapons.

If Measure 4-205 passes, the sheriff could likely not even prepare search warrants for guns or ammunition used in crimes. Nor could the sheriff and other county officials petition or assist families in petitioning a court to order a gun temporarily removed from people — even abusers and stalkers — who present a clear danger to themselves or others.

Abusers with guns are five times more



Some supporters of President Donald Trump carried weapons at a demonstration in Seaside in early August.

likely to kill their victims than those who are unarmed. How safe is our community if more people, mostly women and children, get shot and killed during domestic violence situations because the sheriff was stopped from helping?

The restrictions of Measure 4-205 would also apply to open carry or concealed carry and the transport of guns and ammunition by adults or minors supervised by adults. How is the sheriff supposed to know if a child is being “supervised by adults?” How are sheriff’s deputies to protect our safety, as well as their own, if they

can do little to stop a teen who is menacing people with a loaded gun while an adult stands nearby?

In situations involving guns, Measure 4-205 makes it impossible for county law enforcement officers to do their jobs, and it puts their lives at risk, as well as ours. It will create confusion and danger.

We already have far-right extremist groups like the Sons of Liberty and white supremacist extremist groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer in our county. I’ve seen them brandishing semi-automatic weapons and terrify-

ing people, especially people of color. It is thanks to the work of our sheriff’s department and local police that no physical harm came to anyone during these incidents.

But under Measure 4-205, these self-styled militias will think they can do as they please with their guns and not be held accountable. We are likely to see an increase in vigilantism. Recently, near Corbett, vigilantes with guns set up illegal roadblocks to stop cars and demand identification from residents fleeing wildfires. The county sheriff was able to stop them. But under Measure 4-205, our sheriff would be hamstrung.

The Republican delegate who petitioned to get Measure 4-205 on our ballot cites an opinion by the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in District of Columbia v. Heller. In Heller, he found that citizens have a right to keep a loaded handgun in their home. But he upheld the requirements for registering and licensing handguns, and he made clear the government could regulate the ownership and use of handguns.

Justice Scalia warned repeatedly that the Second Amendment right is not unlimited. “It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose,” he found.

Scalia said the court’s opinion “should not be taken to cast doubt on long-standing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.” He also warned the Second Amendment does not prevent bans on concealed weapons or military-style guns.

Measure 4-205 will only create fear, confusion, chaos and danger for the people of our county and those who enforce our laws. It will undermine the rule of law. For the safety of our families and communities, let’s come together and vote “no.”

Laura Allen is a retired attorney who lives in Seaside.