

Police: ‘I think that this is going to be the new normal’

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Even after restrictions on hotels and other lodging were lifted, the police chief said there has been a steady increase in overnight camping, including 33 recent cases just over one weekend.

“There’s still just a lot of traffic coming down and people aren’t wanting to pay the money for a hotel room, so they’ll just stay in their car,” Schermerhorn said.

The police department has also seen a significant increase in vandalism, criminal mischief and disorderly conduct.

“I guess we were hoping that it would slow down, but it just has continued on,” Schermerhorn said. “We’ve continued to be busy daily with different things, and certainly mental health issues that have been coming up. I don’t foresee a change anytime soon, especially with the way COVID is going and the economy.

“I think that this is going to be the new normal.”

The police department has eight officers, with one or two officers on patrol at a time.

Schermerhorn said the department has felt the burden of the extra calls. He said that between the workload increase, the national movement to defund police and the pandemic, officers are feeling worn down.

“I’ve encouraged all the officers to take vacation and spend time with their families when they can,” he said. “And I think they’re all being pretty good about that and being fair to one another, giving each other the opportunities to take some time off.”

Schermerhorn said an uptick in calls related to mental health issues and alcohol consumption during the pandemic may be tied to the increase in disorderly conduct cases, which have gone up from three in 2019 to 16 this year.

The mobile crisis team from Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county’s mental health contractor, has up to two clinical staff available to assist police throughout the county with calls involving people experiencing mental health crisis. But the agency has limited resources and the staffers are not always immediately available.

“They can only do so much and they still need law enforcement there,” Schermerhorn said. “Of course, we love having the help and working with them, but I think it’s certainly just another tool that we can use in conjunction with what we’re doing.”

Stickers popping up on street signs around town have accounted for most of the vandalism and criminal mischief cases, Schermerhorn said, which have jumped from 16 in 2019 to 31 this year.

Schermerhorn said the stickers usually promote Black Lives Matter and defund the police. Earlier on in the pandemic, there were stickers protesting virus restrictions.

Black Lives Matter protesters usually congregate in the city at noon and Schermerhorn said they have been peaceful and cooperative.

Since protests began, he said officers have been doing weekly training modules and more diversity training is being scheduled.

Domestic violence: ‘An outpouring of support’

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needs. Many are even more isolated than usual and may not have financial autonomy.

The lack of child care, transportation and job opportunities also pose challenges.

The Harbor works closely with other agencies, including Clatsop Community Action, which runs the regional food bank and provides housing assistance. They combine resources to stitch together solutions for people when they can.

“It seems like, right now, that there’s actually a few more resources — people have really been banding together, there’s some CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) money sort of circulating around ... but so many people have been pushed under the poverty level and the unemployment rate in Clatsop County is so high,” Steenbergen said. “I think across the board you see a lot more need.”

Over the past year, The Harbor has collected feedback from the community through surveys and listening sessions.

“The Harbor’s been around for a long time in various forms, and there’s still people out there who don’t know that we’re here, don’t know what services we provide,” Steenbergen said.

“A lot of the feedback that we got through that is that people would really like to see a lot more work with youth, especially at the schools. People are seeing a lot of teen dating violence and sexual violence ... and bullying in schools.”

Prevention

The Harbor was awarded a two-year grant from the Oregon Attorney General’s Sexual Assault Task Force to launch a comprehensive sexual assault prevention program in the county.

The money will be used for outreach and education

on sexual assault prevention.

The agency will begin a 10-week curriculum, called Start Talking, at Knappa High School in mid-November.

The program will discuss healthy relationships and dating violence through a pop culture lens to freshman and sophomores one day a week during health class. It will also provide information about the resources available to youth experiencing abuse.

Laurel Smalley, the principal at Knappa High School, said the curriculum is a way to bring in an expert to teach what healthy relationships look like before there is a problem.

“I’ve done a lot of reaching out to the community partners, in part because we are rural,” she said. “So my kids can’t walk to a clinic or walk to their counselor. There hasn’t been a particular incident that we have seen at school, but there is a need for students, and ... adults too, to understand what do healthy relationships look like.”

Smalley said the school will allow parents to opt students out of the curriculum. She said they will take student feedback, but she hopes to make the program permanent.

The Harbor would like to eventually expand the program to schools throughout the county. The agency also plans to expand education to students at Tongue Point Job Corps and LGBTQ youth through the Q Center in Astoria.

The agency is also hiring an advocate specifically designated for Spanish speakers. She said the agency has done more outreach with Hispanics over the past couple of years, which has resulted in more people reaching out for help.

“The rates of domestic violence are basically the same across the board in all of these communities, but the

access to resources is a little harder, usually for Hispanic and Latinx folks,” Steenbergen said.

She said the ultimate goal with the outreach and education work is to have a county-wide committee to talk about prevention needs and implement solutions.

“I think the thing that has been really great in the pandemic is that we’re seeing that people are really responding,” Steenbergen said. “There has been an outpouring of support and ... the problems have always been there, but they’re worse now and people are really recognizing that.

“And I think one of the things for survivors to know is that the community does support them, that if they decide to leave or they don’t decide to leave or whatever space in between they are, that there are people there that support their decision and also are there to help.”



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