

# Gearhart: Lack of funding, resources has kept outreach from being more effective

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Police and sheriff's deputies can ask mental health experts for guidance when responding to calls involving people in crisis, but, in practice, a lack of funding and resources has kept the outreach from being a more effective tool.

## Fatal encounters

The county has struggled for decades to provide adequate services for people in crisis, a challenge often compounded by alcohol and drug abuse. Over the past year, two people believed to be suffering from mental health difficulties have been killed after interactions with police.

Last April, Alexander Jimenez, a 34-year-old Warrenton man, died after police used a Taser to subdue him during an arrest and he wrestled with sheriff's deputies and police at the county jail. The state medical examiner ruled that Jimenez, who reportedly had schizophrenia, died from the toxic effects of methamphetamine.

**‘THE POLITICAL BODIES OF CITIES AND COUNTIES ARE NOT ADDRESSING THESE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS.’**

**Gearhart Police Chief Jeff Bowman**

In December, Alaina Burns, a 31-year-old Astoria woman, was shot and killed by an Oregon State Police trooper after reportedly brandishing a gun after breaking into a home near Sunset Beach. Friends of Burns' family said she struggled with drug addiction and mental illness.

Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, said she wanted to meet with Bowman to discuss the issue further.

“Our current model relies on a co-response with law enforcement,” Baker said. “We typically go to situations with law enforcement. If the situation is safe, we will take the lead in working with someone who is experiencing psychological distress.”

“We agree that it is ideal to have behavioral health professionals respond to behavioral health crisis. However, we are not equipped to be the sole responder in situations such as when weapons might be involved; if the person is agitated or threatening harm to self or others and the person is unable to engage in conversation.”

“Additionally, we are not equipped to transport people safely if they require assistance at an emergency department, and with law enforcement on scene, they are able to summon that assistance in an expedited manner.”

Baker cited Lane County's CAHOOTS program as a potential model. Teams with a medic and crisis worker often respond to calls involving mental health, addiction and homelessness.

“While we are excited by this model and can see the benefits of its application in our area, this simply can-

not become a reality in our county without the funding to go with it,” she said.

## Funding a challenge

Seaside Police Chief Dave Ham said police will not follow Gearhart and change responses to similar calls for service in Seaside.

Seaside police are not expected to respond to calls in Gearhart, and Bowman's directive will not change Seaside's response coverage to assist them when needed. Seaside's dispatch center will continue to advise Gearhart police of calls for service in their jurisdiction.

Cockrum said she and Bowman have had discussions about police reform over the past year.

“I have reviewed and he has revised the Gearhart Police Department procedures on use of force, but not specifically through the lens of mental health,” the mayor said. “I have asked him to add a procedure with contact information for the public on what to do if they are faced with a mental health

crisis.”

Cockrum proposed consideration of city funding in the next budget cycle for social service providers to assist in responding to people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Regardless of the response from other agencies, Bowman said he recognizes he is “just one person taking on bureaucracy.”

He said he's willing to shoulder that responsibility.

“I'm not going to end my career with one of my officers or myself in a case like this Texas case,” he said.

Bowman said he hopes his letter will inspire other jurisdictions to address police response to mental health care, ultimately leading to a change in law enforcement procedures in the state.

“Having a mental health condition is not a crime,” Bowman said. “And these subjects should not be treated as such. We have a duty to protect all lives and sometimes that task is best done by not doing. We're not psychologists. Let the professionally trained individuals handle these noncriminal calls.”

“It is time for the social services community to step up and start taking an active role,” Bowman wrote in his letter. “There has been legislation calling for change, court rulings calling for change and society calling for change. Why isn't there a sweeping reform across the U.S. within law enforcement agencies to end the practice of law enforcement officers being the first response to these types of calls?”

“My guess, the political bodies of cities and counties are not addressing these mental health needs.”

# County reports 41 new virus cases

The Astorian

Clatsop County reported 41 new coronavirus cases over the past few days.

On Wednesday, the county reported 18 virus cases. All 18 were recovering at home.

## LNG

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The company has asked the U.S. commerce secretary to overturn that decision, but no decision has been forthcoming.

Likewise, the company withdrew its application for a dredging permit from the Department of State Lands in January 2020 after regulators refused to extend their decision deadline and said the application was missing critical information.

Again, the company could reapply, but that would trigger an entirely new process, with a sufficiency review and a new public comment period. Last time around, the agency held five public meetings across the state attended by more than 2,000 people. It received some 49,000 comments on the application.

Meanwhile, Oregon's Land Use Board of Appeals delivered another blow to the project's prospects in December when it overturned Coos County's permits for the project, saying it had made errors in granting a dredging permit for the pipeline.

Debate over the controversial project has been intense in Oregon since it was first proposed as a gas import facility in 2005.

Backers eventually shifted their rationale for the facility, proposing it as an export facility after the industry's fracking revolution shifted the outlook for U.S. natural gas supplies from shortage to surplus. Either way, boosters have touted the project's potential employment and property tax impacts in an area of the state that has lagged economically since the early 1980s. Opponents have consistently called it a potential environmental, public safety and property rights disaster.

A competing \$6 billion LNG export terminal and pipeline project on the Skippanon Peninsula in Warrenton collapsed in 2016.

## Permitting setbacks

The state permitting setbacks for the Jordan Cove project effectively bring it back to square one. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission denied the project's federal license application in 2016, saying the project backers had not demonstrated sufficient commercial demand for the gas it would process to demonstrate a public need for the facility and overcome the impacts to landowners along the pipeline route.

The company resubmitted the application once the Trump administration took

On Tuesday, the county reported 23 virus cases.

Two were hospitalized and the others were recovering at home.

The county has recorded 713 cases since March. According to the county, 16 were hospitalized and five have died.

office, hoping to get a more favorable decision once the president appointed new Republican members to the commission.

The commission did grant the company a conditional license last year, agreeing with a staff recommendation that most of the project's impacts could be reduced to less than significant levels, and the public need for the facility outweighed any of those impacts.

Yet Tuesday's decision cast doubt on whether Pembina has a viable path forward. It may not get a favorable reception under the incoming Biden administration, which has already vowed to kill the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project in its first

days and rejoin the Paris climate accord.

“Today marks a big win for protecting the South Coast because it reinforces our state's environmental laws and reflects local community input,” Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, said in an emailed statement on Tuesday. “From Day One with this project, I have insisted that Oregonians receive a fair, open, fact-based and non-political process while FERC determines whether LNG projects are necessary and in the public's best interest — including strict adherence to the Clean Water Act.”

“Today's unanimous decision by FERC is good news and the logical conclusion of that process.”

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# Vaccines: ‘We have a task force’

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Mixed messages from the federal and state governments on when new shipments will arrive — and who will be next in the priority line — have caused confusion and some resentment.

Mark Kujala, the chairman of the county Board of Commissioners, who works for the Columbia Memorial Hospital Foundation, said he is frustrated by the lack of communication.

He said the most important thing for people to know is that “once we receive vaccines we've got a framework in place to distribute them efficiently.”

The county, in partnership with Columbia Memorial and Providence Seaside Hospital, created the vaccine task force to manage the rollout locally.

The task force was formalized in January, with Laman in the lead role. He said more organizations have started to get involved, including Coastal Family Health Center, local pharmacies and the Columbia Pacific Coordinated Care Organization, which oversees the Oregon Health Plan in Clatsop, Columbia and Tillamook counties.

Laman said the hospitals and Coastal Family Health Center have given their doses to the Public Health Department “so that the task force can be in complete control of who's getting vaccinated, where the events are happening and making sure that everything is coordinated and rolled out in a good manner.”

“Our county is ahead of many counties in terms of the fact that we have a task force,” he said. “We have a way to register. We've got a

way to follow up with people. We have the plans in place to be able to roll this out as soon as we get the vaccine.”

Vaccinations started with health care, emergency response, long-term care and other care home staff. The task force will use the remaining vaccines for the more than 400 people left on the priority list in the first phase, which includes in-home care services, dentist offices and group foster homes.

Some essential county staff, elected officials and social service agency staffers have also been vaccinated.

A county spokesman said some county commissioners were vaccinated because they make up the county's governing body — an integral part of keeping the county functioning and directing services and programs. The spokesman said it was also a way to reassure the public that the vaccine is safe.

Columbia Memorial and Providence Seaside will receive some second doses this week for hospital staff.

As vaccines become available, the task force will notify the public on Wednesdays, with information about when and where the next vaccination event will take place, who is eligible and how to register.

The process will look the same when second doses become available.

The next phase includes about 1,200 teachers and other educators.

After a delay Gov. Kate Brown blamed on the Trump administration, seniors are expected to be placed into four tiers for vaccination: those over 80, those over 75, those over 70 and those over 65.

# Helicopter: Life Flight has moved 800 patients with virus

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Life Flight's recent investment also includes a flight simulator based in Aurora. Clayton said the simulator will save crews from traveling to Dallas, Texas, and Denver for similar training.

Life Flight established a base at the Astoria Regional Airport in 2015, adding the ability to transport patients from the coast to Portland in less than 30 minutes in its

blue Augusta 109 helicopter. Last year, Life Flight completed a new hangar next to JBT Lektro, an electric airplane tug manufacturer.

During the coronavirus pandemic, Life Flight has transported 800 patients with coronavirus, Haley Dowell, a spokeswoman for the non-profit, said in an email.

“Of note, we transported 21 suspected COVID patients from Clatsop County, of which two ended up being positive,” she said.

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