

Pregnancy: Hospital policies have shifted many times

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and could adapt quickly to new recommendations and public health guidance.

“You’re never going to have a bunch of people crowded into one area,” Orton said, adding, “It’s not where sick people go. It’s a place where people are going when they’re healthy. ... You’re separating a vulnerable population from a sick population.”

During 2020, the birth center saw women who chose the facility because they knew they could bring partners, family members and support professionals like doulas with them. Others turned to the birth center looking for middle ground.

For Astorians Amanda Noyes and Regina Mysliwec, the birth center was a compromise between Noyes’ interest in home birth and Mysliwec’s desire for a more clinical setting. But when Noyes’ labor went on and on without much progression — 46 hours would pass from the time of her first contraction to the birth of her daughter — the couple decided to transfer to Columbia Memorial Hospital, where Mysliwec works as an emergency room doctor.

For them, the timing worked out, though. The hospital’s visitor policy at the time allowed for two people in the room. Their doula stayed with them.

Shifting policies

Policies have shifted many times at local hospitals during the pandemic, but hospitals have looked for new ways to support patients.

Columbia Memorial now offers devices to patients who want to “bring” another person besides their partner or spouse into the room with them. Providence Seaside Hospital reviews requests for extra guests during labor and delivery and makes exceptions to its rules if patients need the additional support.

Doulas, professionals who provide emotional and physical support to pregnant women, have turned to FaceTime to connect if hospital policies do not allow them to accompany a client.

Michael Adler, an obstetrician-gynecologist at Providence Seaside, remembers the early days of the pandemic as a constant worry about surfaces. He’d go into a room and worry about touching a box — did it have the coronavirus on it? — or wonder if he should immediately wipe down a counter after he set his hand against it. Small actions, but every one of them questioned and analyzed with ever-evolving information.

Now, closing in on a year



Rebeckah Orton runs the Astoria Birth Center.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

County reports two new virus cases

The Astorian

Clatsop County on Friday reported two new coronavirus cases.

A man in his 30s and a woman in her 40s living in the southern part of the county were reportedly recovering at home.

The county has recorded 715 cases since March. According to the county, 16 were hospitalized and five have died.

‘I THINK I’M PRETTY RESIGNED TO THE FACT THAT IT’S GOING TO BE THIS WAY FOR US FOR A WHILE.’

Hilary Levine | Brownsmead resident who had her son in the fall

into the pandemic, the precautions that once felt so strange and fraught have become routine.

They continue to provide education and coaching to patients, but now when Katherine Davidson, the inpatient nurse manager at Providence Seaside, steps into a new mother’s room, more often than not the woman’s partner is already automatically pulling a mask on.

Kendra Gohl, the director of nursing at Columbia Memorial and the hospital’s infection preventionist, feels she has seen an increased sense of empathy and concern among the nursing staff, particularly in the hospital’s family birthing center.

“As you take away guests and visitors, that really impacts the patient,” she said. Communication becomes even more important.

For Childress, communication and connection are key components in her midwifery practice. She’s in clients homes for hourlong vis-

its ahead of the birth and the entire family is often involved.

As the pandemic continued, she realized these appointments were lasting for longer and longer periods of time. The questions, concerns and thoughts were much the same. What had changed was the isolation.

“Here I am coming into their home and I’m one of the few people that is,” she said.

Existential questions

Pregnancy can raise many existential questions. During her own pregnancies years ago, Childress remembers wondering, “What kind of a world are we bringing children into?”

“That question, it’s not a new idea,” she said, “but it just seems like it’s gotten so much more dire than even 30 years ago.”

For Erica Ditch, the timing couldn’t have been stranger. She woke up on March 16, found out she was pregnant and went to her job at a dentist office in Astoria like nor-

mal. Later that day, Gov. Kate Brown announced the first shutdown to curb the spread of the virus in Oregon and the dentist told his staff the office would have to temporarily close.

“What are we doing?” Ditch wondered in those early days as everything changed around her. “We’re bringing a baby into this world that’s not even going to exist in another month.”

Still, being temporarily out of a job meant Ditch was able to accompany her husband, a commercial fisherman, to Alaska for the early months of her pregnancy. They spent one-on-one time together that would have been impossible otherwise.

When her stay in Alaska put her out of network for her virtual doctor appointments, she switched to the Astoria Birth Center and had an unmedicated childbirth — an experience she cherishes.

Like many of the women The Astorian interviewed, she spent most of her pregnancy away from others, limiting her activities. Now she is weighing the pros and cons of returning to work. It’s hard to contemplate such a full return to the world, she said.

Brownsmead resident Hilary Levine had her son in the fall. She spent much of her pregnancy in isolation, working from home. Her husband, a fisheries biologist, ran most of their errands.

Though her son has received his first round of vaccines he has yet to set foot in a store. Levine takes him to the doctor and on walks around Brownsmead. She hopes to throw a birthday party for him at the Brownsmead Grange when he turns 1. It might end up being his first real public appearance.

For now, she said, “I think I’m pretty resigned to the fact that it’s going to be this way for us for a while.”

Pool: ‘We’re going to need funds when the pandemic is over’

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city’s recreation coordinator, said March is the soonest the city could ready the pool and a 12-person staff for a limited reopening. The reservation model is similar to one used by the Sunset Pool in Seaside, which has repeatedly opened and closed as the county seesaws between the extreme and high-risk categories.

“It’s strongly recommended from the (Oregon Health Authority) and is definitely a model that we would be willing to utilize,” she told the City Council at a work session. “It entails patrons coming in for a 45-minute use period at the top of every hour, and then closing the facility for 15 minutes to clean.”

The city closed the pool in March, focusing on transitioning the Astoria Recreation Center into additional preschool space. But recent budget forecasts showed the collection of property taxes, the largest source of revenue for parks, on pace with prior years and lodging taxes at 88% compared to the previous year despite travel and business restrictions meant to limit the spread of the virus.

Restarting the pool is estimated to cost \$20,990 — about 60% for new materials and 40% for a part-time staff of around 12. The city would need to hire additional staff for administrative assistance, health screenings at the front desk, enforcing social distancing and monitoring locker rooms and exercise machine rooms,

in addition to recertifying lifeguards and other part-time staffers.

Operating the pool has never been profitable, open or closed. The city loses \$35,270 keeping the pool closed but in working condition. Staff estimates a limited reopening would cost an additional \$8,300 a month after startup. The parks department has about \$970,000 in cash on hand.

Jonah Dart-McLean, the city’s parks director, said the department feels it can sustainably and safely manage a limited reopening at the pool.

“We think that we have the sufficient funds in our current budget status to do that, and we think that we’ve obviously seen a large amount of community desire to reopen the facility in some way, shape or form” he said. “So we feel that this is a plan that moves forward, testing the waters if you will, to be able to reintroduce the service and then also grow from there as it’s financially prudent to do so.”

City Manager Brett Estes said the pool would provide a scalable model for restarting parks services as the pandemic allows.

“We’re going to need funds when the pandemic is over to continue to stand up future operations, because we haven’t had all the revenue sources coming from all the other parks activities,” he said. “So it’s trying to find that balance on everything. We feel that this is actually a very good step heading in that direction.”

Lighting: City will present on project within the next month

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If federal transportation funds are included, the match is less than \$67,000 from the city’s Promote Astoria fund for lodging tax revenue, along with \$30,000 in-kind through city parks staff managing the project. With only state funds, the match balloons to more than \$282,000 from the Promote Astoria fund, with no in-kind possibility.

City Manager Brett Estes said the city has no say in whether federal funds are included.

Despite the uncertainty of how much local money would be needed to complete the project, the City Council unanimously supported the application.

“This is the thing I heard the most in the last four years, especially since I moved back to town and as I proceeded to become a councilor,” said City Councilor Tom Hilton, who represents Ward 4 covering the eastern portion of the city. “The neighborhood really,

really wants the lights — as well as the tourism industry, the hotels, Safeway — in order to protect our people.”

The application to expand lighting to the east comes on the heels of another application the city submitted in March to the state Parks and Recreation Department to improve the western portion of the Riverwalk between the Port of Astoria and Mill Pond neighborhood.

The \$841,000 project would enhance lighting, add wayfinding signs, improve access for people with disabilities and install a Portland Loo-style outside toilet at Peoples Park. The project would require a \$336,000 local match split between Promote Astoria and urban renewal funds.

The grant program was put on hold at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. But the city was recently notified that the application process has restarted. Estes said the city will present on its project within the next month.

Schools: ‘My opinion is that there isn’t a perfect solution’

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“The cases were confined to a specific area within the building, which has been closed and sanitized,” he wrote in a statement. “The district continues to monitor and adhere to the health and safety standards that have been created to protect our staff and students.”

Hoppes’ recommendation to delay a reopening of schools was rooted in concern about the high number of local cases and rate of infection, he said.

But with unease about students’ emotional and mental well-being as many continue their school work in isolation, administrators will also look at ways to expand limited in-person instruction and offer more opportunities for students to interact face to face.

Vaccinations will soon be available for school district staff and teachers — 30 employees who wanted the vaccine have already received it as of Thursday — but experts are predicting another spike in virus cases in mid-February, Hoppes told the school board Thursday. The school district wants to avoid reopening schools only to have to close the doors again.

Gov. Kate Brown has pri-

oritized a return to in-person instruction. State case-load metrics that have guided how and when schools reopen are now advisory rather than mandatory, but school districts say they may risk losing coronavirus liability protections if they don’t continue to follow the metrics. They must also comply with other state guidelines if they open outside of the metrics, including a potentially difficult requirement to provide on-site testing for staff or students who show virus symptoms.

While the Astoria school board believes they have strong safety measures in place, other worries persist as local cases remain high.

VACCINATIONS WILL SOON BE AVAILABLE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT STAFF AND TEACHERS

“We are so close to being able to bring kids back to school without having to have as many concerns as we do at this time,” said Jimmy Pearson, the Astoria Library director, who serves on the school board.

Among the school district’s staff, half did not feel comfortable about reopening

so soon while others remained uncertain about what they would do if schools reopened. Families surveyed by the district were split on whether students should return to in-person classes.

On Thursday, a high school freshman read a letter to the board urging them to reopen schools. She spoke of fellow classmates who may be suffering abuse at home or struggling with their mental health. She faces daily distractions while juggling responsibilities at home and overlapping online classes. She said she feels a level of sadness she has never experienced before.

Two parents said their children are struggling academically and emotionally over the school year. One of the parents, Lisa Hankwitz, is also a first grade teacher at Astor Elementary School and described the impacts she has seen on her students in the English language development class she teaches. Online learning is especially difficult for students who know very

little English, she said.

Even if students are only on campus for a couple of hours a day, as had been proposed in the reopening plan, “what we can do in-person far exceeds what we can do online,” she said.

But Bonny Johnson, another parent, pointed to the virus cases at the middle school. She urged the school board to stick to remote learning with some limited in-person instruction for students who need it until more people can be vaccinated and the local caseload drops.

Board member Heidi Wintermute, a school psychologist who has worked in Washington state’s Ocean Beach School District, said she has experienced the joy of students and teachers being reunited when a school reopened and then the frustration when schools had to close again.

Even when schools reopen, nothing goes back to normal, she said. Students will still not be receiving the same education they would receive in a pandemic-free year.

“My opinion is that there isn’t a perfect solution,” Wintermute said. “And no matter what we do, somebody is going to be impacted negatively and no matter what we choose it isn’t going to be equitable for everyone.”

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