

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## BEHIND THE NEWS

# 'Homelessness has many different faces'

**C**latsop Community Action has an outsized role in the social services safety net on the North Coast.

The nonprofit operates the regional food bank and provides housing, energy assistance and other critical services to low-income people.

Over the past year, Clatsop County has expanded the agency's portfolio to encompass a veterans services officer and a homeless liaison.



**DERRICK DePLEDGE**

Like Helping Hands and the volunteer-driven Astoria Warming Center and Filling Empty Bellies, Clatsop Community Action has tried to change perceptions around homelessness.

"It's not just people who are staying on Commercial Street or by the Riverwalk," said Viviana Matthews, the agency's executive director. "We see a lot of people who are staying in their vehicles, or living in a place not meant for human habitation, such as an abandoned building or an RV that is not considered a home."

"Homelessness has many different faces. I just want to be able to tell people to have an open mind, because they don't know the person next to them at the store, if that person is struggling with homelessness."

"You don't often think about people who are couch surfing and doubled up, so that's a huge amount of homelessness," said Susan Prettyman, the agency's social services program manager. "I think it's worth noting that last year we helped with over 12,000 services to people in Clatsop County, and we don't care if they are federal (defined) homeless or state (defined) homeless, we just want to help families."

In an interview, Matthews and Prettyman talked about the challenges of homeless outreach during the coronavirus pandemic, the role of local government and the new homeless liaison.

**Q: How has the coronavirus pandemic challenged the North Coast's response to homelessness?**

**Matthews:** I would say probably the homelessness issue went to the back burner, because we needed to work on preventing people from becoming homeless.

To me, we haven't done much to help the people who are staying on the street, because our focus has been preventing homelessness.

**Prettyman:** When businesses were closed down and people were laid off, and people waited weeks and weeks to receive their unemployment, that caused a huge amount of housing instability.

**Q: What do you see as the role of**



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Viviana Matthews, right, is the executive director of Clatsop Community Action. Susan Prettyman is the agency's social services program manager.

*BUT FUNDING, IT'S THE NO. 1 ISSUE THAT WE'RE HAVING. FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF SERVICES, NOT ONLY A HOUSE OR AN APARTMENT OR A PLACE FOR THEM TO STAY, BUT ALSO SERVICES TO HELP THE HOMELESS POPULATION WITH THEIR ISSUES, SUCH AS MENTAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION AND ALL THE AREAS.*

**local government in responding to homelessness?**

**Matthews:** Many different ways. One of them would be funding for homelessness services, such as the homeless liaison in Clatsop County.

The other would be looking into housing, not only for homeless, but affordable housing for people who are able to move to more of a permanent solution.

**Prettyman:** I think we have a responsibility to provide housing. Housing is a basic human right.

**Q: Housing has been a significant public policy issue on the North Coast for the past several years. Astoria created a homelessness task force in 2017. Why haven't we seen more progress?**

**Matthews:** The main reason probably is funding. Once we start talking about funding and how we can work on different services for the homeless population,

then we see some alternative services to the homeless population.

But funding, it's the No. 1 issue that we're having. For different types of services, not only a house or an apartment or a place for them to stay, but also services to help the homeless population with their issues, such as mental health and nutrition and all the areas.

**Prettyman:** There's definitely a lack of availability of housing and places for us to provide those services for people.

**Q: The Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District's retreat from a warming center in Seaside is an example of the gap between good intentions and reality. What went wrong there?**

**Matthews:** I think we tried to do it too fast without having a lot of plan behind it.

CCA was able to partner with Helping Hands in trying to accommodate and trying to make it happen within a

certain amount of days without going to the board first. And make sure that it's first approved, and then we have to have a plan in place, and all of that.

We just went into the mode of trying to fix it, trying to accommodate as many homeless as possible going into a warming center, because we do have the funding for that.

But we forgot that we needed to stay back and plan it. This was, to me, a great learning opportunity for next year. So it's not a closed door, but definitely something that we are going to be working to achieve for next year.

**Prettyman:** I think that it happened really quickly, and I think that was a huge barrier to it.

**Q: You are bringing on a homeless liaison. How will you measure success in that position?**

**Matthews:** I would say by making sure the homeless liaison interacts with the homeless who are in Clatsop County and provides services. That could be information and referral ... mental health, medical assistance and all of that.

To me, how we're going to measure success is going to be by the numbers the homeless liaison is going to see, how many people they are going to be reaching out to.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Get the vaccine

I have friends who have told me they don't plan on getting the COVID-19 vaccine because, in the past, when they got the flu shot, it didn't work.

The yearly flu shot is a gamble because it contains four flu virus strains that are serious viruses; and the above selections are chosen months ahead of the flu season, hoping they chose the correct viruses that will hit us.

So, the flu shot-included viruses are an educated crap shoot. Therefore, people say the vaccine didn't work, and we hear that that year's vaccine was only 30%, 40%, 50%, etc. effective.

Other vaccines are designed for a specific virus. Examples are: measles, mumps, smallpox, shingles, chickenpox, polio and tetanus. They are extremely effective because they were designed to attack specific viruses.

The COVID-19 vaccines are designed to attack a specific virus, thus their effectiveness is in the 70% to 90%-plus ranges. This vaccine isn't crap shoot. It is for a specific virus, and hopefully for the mutations. Because COVID-19 has a tendency to mutate, we will probably need yearly boosters.

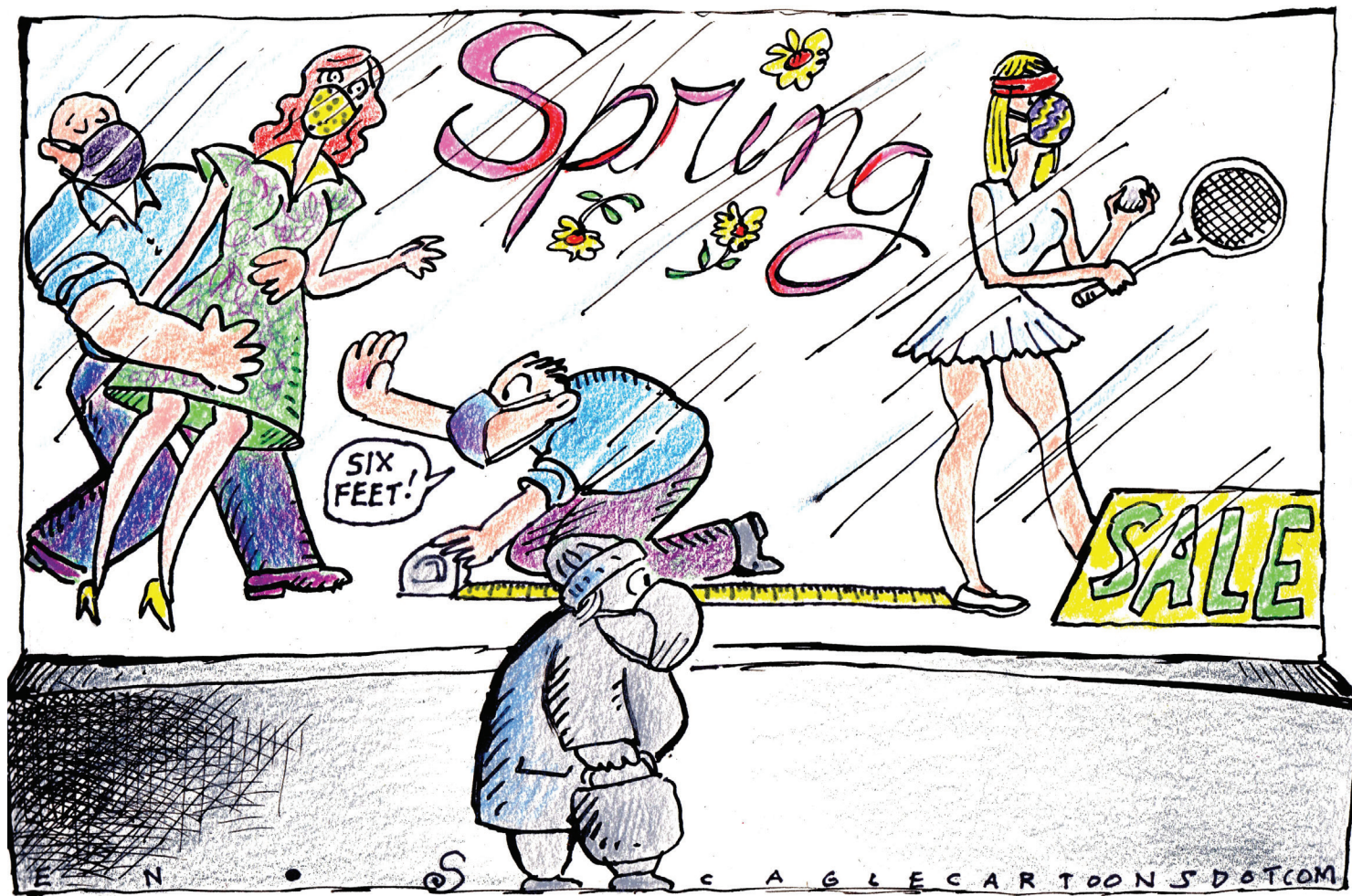
Get the vaccine when it is your time. Help defeat this deadly virus.

KAREN ELDER  
Astoria

### Got my first shot

After all my complaining about the vaccine rollout, I finally got my first shot at the Clatsop County Fairgrounds.

There was a long line, and the parking lot was quite full. However, I must commend the health department. The line moved well.



The situation was organized, well-staffed with volunteers and there was a pleasant reception. I can't say enough good comments about how well-run things were.

REBA OWEN  
Warrenton

### What causes homelessness?

As I began to look deeper into the problem of homelessness, I asked myself the question: What causes homelessness?

Of course, I knew there would be many answers, because just like any population,

the unsheltered population is diverse. I was left more confused after a consultation with Professor Google, so being a numbers cruncher, chose to collect some data for myself, and see what they had to say.

The short answer — rental prices have a huge impact on homelessness. Duh. As it turns out, two scholars, John Quigley and Steven Raphael, beat me to this conclusion when they published their research findings in 2001. They estimated that a "10% increase in rents is associated with a 6.5% increase in the incidence of homelessness."

A March 2019 study, prepared for the

Oregon Community Foundation, showed "median rents across U.S. states explains 43% of the variance in rates of homelessness in 2017."

Further, they found that "over the 2010-2016 time period, Oregon created only 63 new housing units for every 100 households that formed during the time period." That's not good. We're not solving the problem; we're allowing it to get worse.

My point is, we have had this information for 20 years. Obviously there are other factors, but housing solves homelessness.

RICK BOWERS  
Astoria