

County reports seven new virus cases

The Astorian

Clatsop County on Monday reported seven new coronavirus cases.

The cases include a woman

in her 40s living in the southern part of the county. The others live in the northern part of the county and involve a woman in her 30s, a woman in her 50s and two men and two women in their 60s.

All seven were recovering at home.

The county has recorded 866 cases since the start of the pandemic. According to the county, 20 were hospitalized and eight have died.

At Issue: ‘We don’t have a choice’

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those calls for service, we would have so much more time on our hands. We could better respond to the emergency calls for service. We could provide a higher police presence in our community and do more community policing, all the things that our community would like us to do.

“But, unfortunately, that’s where we spent a lot of our time. And it’s not the best use of our time, but we don’t have a choice, either.”

‘We’re not always the end-all, be-all of solutions’

Astoria Deputy Chief Eric Halverson said officers get to know the people they frequently encounter and spend a lot of time encouraging people to change their behavior and engage in services.

Over the past several years, there has been more recognition locally that law enforcement is not separate from mental health and other social services, and there is a deeper understanding of their distinct roles, limitations and legal obligations.

However, there is still a misconception that calling the police can solve issues that are often rooted in chronic, complex social problems.

“And I think that’s a piece that sometimes the community doesn’t understand, is that a lot of people think that you can call the police and that we can make people do certain things,” Halverson said. “Sometimes we can. A lot of times we can’t. And we’re not always the end-all, be-all of solutions. We’re there to deal with the bad behavior, knowing it’s going to return if we don’t find the deeper solution.”

In Oregon and across the United States, there is movement toward having mental health or social services advocates answer some crisis response calls, either with police officers or instead of police. U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, has sought to enhance federal Medicaid funding so states can expand on ideas like CAHOOTS, a crisis intervention program of the White Bird Clinic in Eugene.

Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county’s mental health provider, has a mobile crisis team available to help law enforcement, but inadequate funding and staffing has made it a less useful resource for police. The mental health agency also hopes to open a rapid access center in Astoria, providing clinical drop-in services for mental health and substance abuse. A crisis respite center in Warrenton was initially pitched to serve a similar purpose, but the agency has found financial sustainability for the respite center in short-term crisis care and long-term residential services.

Beacon Clubhouse, supported by the Clatsop County branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is a membership-based community center for people with mental health issues at the First Baptist Church on Seventh Street.

Two new homeless liaisons, hired to work under Clatsop Community Action, will do outreach and help connect vulnerable people to resources.

A new county jail at the former North Coast Youth Correctional Facility in Warrenton will provide more space and relieve pressure to release inmates early, which has often been the practice at the jail in Astoria because of overcrowding.

Police make arrests for crimes such as assault and issue citations for lesser offenses, but many of the people they frequently respond to do not usually engage in the types of behavior that leads to substantial jail time. Many also do not meet the criteria under state law to be forced into treatment, which means they have to voluntarily agree to seek help.

Police, hospital administrators and mental health providers have



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Geoff Spalding is the Astoria police chief.

said that Oregon’s high threshold for civil commitment is one of the biggest barriers to helping people in crisis. A court must find that a person has a mental disorder that poses a danger to themselves or others or they are unable to provide for basic personal needs like health and safety.

“There’s been a lot of talk over this past year about police not being involved in particular things that really shouldn’t be in their wheelhouse, like dealing with mental health calls,” Halverson said. “But what we end up seeing is we do reach out for those resources and they do try to provide the resources. But then when the person refuses to accept those resources, it’s back to calling the police.”

Over time, officers witness a familiar cycle that often ends badly.

“And the officers are not cold to that,” Halverson said. “You have to develop relationships with these people and you see that they need assistance. And it’s so frustrating because we’re in a business where our job is to try and problem-solve and fix things. And when you keep on trying to tape it together and you can’t quite get it fixed over and over and over again, it can be very frustrating for the officers who are responding to these things.”

“And people might not see that in law enforcement, but it does affect officers that are trying.”

Kirk Wintermute, an Astoria attorney and president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Clatsop County, called it “a slow rolling crisis.

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Astoria Police Chief
Geoff Spalding

“It’s frustrating for everybody in the system to be dealing with. I mean, I know that the police are not mental health first responders and the jail are not mental health providers, but they’re kind of ending up in that situation,” he said. “And I’m not a psychologist and I’m not a psychiatrist, but I end up doing a lot of that work sometimes it seems like, too.”

“It just seems like there’s just such a failure of the system and it’s landing on these people who are the most vulnerable.”

Both Wintermute and Halverson said they are open to the state Legislature reviewing the civil commitment law.

“It should be a stringent process — they’re taking away people’s lib-

erty,” Wintermute said. “But we also end up with people in this gap where they might be committable under a more loosened process, but they’re not and so they get released oftentimes without much planning or much support because they’re on the street or they’re mentally ill and they can’t engage.”

Wintermute said he has represented people in court who he believes should have been committed or engaged in mental health services.

“But because mental health either can’t or doesn’t have the resources to engage them, they end up in the criminal justice system and then they end up in the state hospital,” he said. “But that’s not what that process was built for. And so it’s a round peg in a square hole and it’s not good for anybody, frankly. It’s more expensive. It’s more traumatizing for the defendant. It doesn’t work.”

‘What does this person need?’

There are undercurrents of frustration and urgency among law enforcement leaders and social services advocates. Calls tied to crisis response have surged during the coronavirus pandemic. Two people in Clatsop County with mental health and substance abuse issues were killed last year after interactions with police.

In January, in an announcement meant to draw attention to the lack of mental health treatment options, Gearhart Police Chief Jeff Bowman said his officers would no longer respond to mental health calls unless there is an imminent threat of physical harm.

In February, Astoria took a tougher approach to bad behavior at the park at Ninth and Astor streets after tracking 470 calls for service last year. The tipping point came after a stabbing and an attack with a machete.

Spalding said it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what is needed, but he knows there is no single answer.

“Especially if you’re talking about dealing with individuals who are homeless, too. I think there’s a lot of people that feel that we need to have more housing and we need a place for somebody to go,” the police chief said. “I’ve heard lots and lots of stories about providing housing for homeless individuals, and they stay there for a night or two, and then they’re back on the street again. It doesn’t work for (some of) them.”

“Even if you provided housing, there’s a lot of them that won’t take avail of that. Some of them won’t work regardless of what you do. There’s certain individuals that are only going to do so much when you get to a certain point,” he said. “That’s why I just think there’s so many different ways to approach it. It’s almost like you have to take each individual, triage them and say, ‘What does this person need?’

“I think if you address the root of the problem, ultimately you’re going to address the behavior that we’re seeing.”

Vaccine: Pandemic makes outreach even more difficult

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Johnson & Johnson vaccine, depending on supplies available from the Clatsop County Public Health Department.

The Oregonian reported Sunday that Oregon will receive far fewer doses of this vaccine than previously expected — a mere 7,300 doses from the federal government, down from the 61,400 doses expected.

Planning for the wellness event only began recently. Organizers say it will be a sort of mini version of the annual Project Homeless Connect event held in Seaside. That event includes a count of the homeless population and seeks to connect people to services.

“We’re trying to do the best we can in such a short time,” said Viviana Matthews, the executive director of Clatsop Community Action.

Though vaccinations are the impetus for the wellness event, the social services agency is bringing in a shower station and will provide to-go meals and bags of hygiene items for attendees.

The recovery ally team from Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare will be on site. Matthews also hopes to be able to provide assistance with Oregon Health Plan enrollment and free haircuts.

The agency and its partners have often heard there is a need for a Homeless Connect-style event in the spring, Matthews added.

“We’d like to see as many vaccinations as we can,” said Susan Prettyman, the social services program manager for Clatsop Community Action, “but even one vaccine in an arm is better than zero.”

Homeless advocates and researchers believe the coronavirus has had a far greater impact on homeless populations than

is reflected in official data. Clatsop Community Action has provided wraparound services — meals, laundry, lodging, transportation — to people who had to quarantine after they became infected with the coronavirus. A major outbreak among workers at Pacific Seafood formed a substantial bulk of the people the agency served, but the homeless have been a significant portion as well, Matthews said.

Certainly, the pandemic has made outreach even more difficult on the North Coast. Many social services and advocacy offices are operating in a more limited way while access to public libraries — with computers and free internet — has also been limited.

With the wellness event, Matthews wants to make sure people have access to the information they need to make a decision about the vaccine, and then have the option to receive it.

The nonprofit CARE, Inc., a social services agency in Tillamook, organized a similar event at the end

of March in that city. Billed as “Homeless Connect (Part 2),” it offered a variety of services and resources, but the primary purpose was to offer the coronavirus vaccine to people in the community who are homeless or at high risk of becoming homeless.

Around 40 people attended the event — most of them existing clients of CARE. Of those, 20 were vaccinated, according to Peter Starkey, executive director of CARE. The nonprofit also provided shelter for two nights to people who received the vaccine.

Clatsop Community Action is in conversation with the Astoria Warming Center and area hotels to provide a safe place for people to go if they feel ill after receiving the vaccine.

Wentzel: Master gardeners plan to dedicate a row in their own gardens for the community

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Wentzel has a background in helping communities better understand and engage with farming and food resources. An avid gardener herself, she firmly believes you do not need to spend a lot of money or own property to grow a garden that can supply you with some basic food.

A stint in the Peace Corps took her to Paraguay, where she worked with subsistence farmers and looked at ways to support the smallest scale farmers with the fewest resources, she said. It was an experience that motivated her to return to school to learn more, but also, later, to look at ways to engage directly with her own farming and growing communities in the Pacific Northwest.

She moved to the coast two years ago to work for the Tillamook-based nonprofit Food Roots and joined the extension service in December.

The coronavirus pandemic shut down many volunteer and educational opportunities last year for the master gardener program she now oversees, and it continues to hamper activities this year.

The program’s biggest event — the annual plant sale — will be held in May, though at a different location than usual.

The master gardening training itself is not happening this year, a first for the program since it was founded in the 1980s.

But Wentzel sees the lull as an opportunity.

“It’s giving us some time to think about the programs we offer and the ways we’re engag-

ing in the communities, to think about who we are and who we are not including in our program,” she said.

This year, the master gardeners are planning to dedicate a row in their own gardens for the community. The food grown in these rows will go to local food pantries, where fresh produce is one of the hardest things to keep in stock.

It is an exciting plan after a year where food insecurities have only been further highlighted and exacerbated, Wentzel said.

For would-be gardeners — and there are many after the pandemic gave people both more time and inclination to try to grow their own food — Wentzel hopes to begin building more coast-specific gardening resources. The North Coast climate is really particular, she said, and contains many microclimates. While you can easily grow corn in Jewell, it may be more difficult on Astoria’s South Slope, for example.

The coast also, in general, still sees dramatic nighttime temperature drops well into spring.

So, Wentzel suggests, try not to get fooled by the occasional warm spring day that might entice you to start planting seeds earlier than you should. Closer to Memorial Day is often a better time to start a coastal garden, she said.

And, if you’re still not sure what will grow best in your area, spy on your neighbors.

“If someone has a nice garden down the street, take a peek,” she said. “It’s a clue.”

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