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## CORONAVIRUS



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Sean Acuna and Luke Crews work behind the counter at Pizza a'fetta in Seaside. The restaurant wants to hire more staff in preparation for summer.

## As the economy recovers from the pandemic, a labor shortage emerges

### Unemployment benefits, child care among factors

By EDWARD STRATTON  
*The Astorian*

A sign outside McDonald's in Astoria advertises jobs starting at \$15 an hour — \$3 above the \$12 minimum wage on the North Coast and the rallying cry of labor activists across the nation who want to more than double the federal standard.

After a year of business closures, layoffs and other disruptions to the economy from the coronavirus pandemic, many businesses are eager to hire, but are finding that some people are reluctant to return to the workforce.

Unemployment benefits, child care, family obligations and health concerns are among the factors, along with a weariness over the unpredictability of virus restrictions. Clatsop County moved back into the state's high-risk level in late April after a surge of new virus cases this spring.

While businesses have always competed for skilled workers, the pandemic-related labor shortage has created competition for traditionally



Edward Stratton/The Astorian

The McDonald's restaurant in Astoria upped its starting wage to \$15 amid a coronavirus pandemic that has led to a labor shortage.

lower-wage, entry-level and seasonal workers, leading some to offer higher pay and other incentives to attract a deeper pool of job candidates.

Oregon's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in March was 7.1%, down 1% from February but still more than twice the rate for the same month last year, just before unemployment jumped to more than 23% after virus shutdowns.

State unemployment paid \$370 a week on average the first quarter of the year, in addition to \$300 a week from the federal government. The benefits total \$16.75 an hour for someone working full time, or \$34,840 a year.

### 'It's economics'

Seaside hotelier Masudur Khan prides himself on keeping a staff of around 100 year-round, while adding about 10% to 15% during the summer tourism rush. This year, amid high demand for housekeepers, that means paying his employees at least \$16 an hour through Labor Day, when the more generous unemployment benefits are scheduled to end.

"There's no option, because there's demand and less supply," he said. "It's economics, and they have the power. If you hire them for \$14 or \$15 (an hour), after one week of training, they say, 'I'm going to go to the other hotel,

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## Clinic provides vaccines to homeless

### One-dose vaccines were available

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ  
*The Astorian*

Twenty homeless people received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine against the coronavirus at a health and wellness clinic on Thursday at the Astoria Armory.

People who are homeless have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, but are also among the more difficult groups to reach with resources and information.

Clatsop Community Action, which organized the event, did not set any concrete vaccination goals ahead of the clinic. They planned to offer the vaccine to anyone who wanted it and to answer questions about the vaccine, as well as provide other wellness services.

Susan Prettyman, the agency's social services program manager, said that even being able to give one person the shot was better than nothing.

The event saw 60 people, who took advantage of other services offered at the clinic, including showers. Clatsop Community Action also distributed sleeping bags, clothes, backpacks and other items.

The Clatsop County Public Health Department provided vaccines for the event.

There had been some concern about whether the Johnson & Johnson vaccine would be available after federal health agencies called for a temporary pause in the vaccine's use earlier in April because of a rare blood-clotting disorder. That pause lifted ahead of the clinic.

The single-shot vaccine is ideal for use in the homeless population since it doesn't require people to schedule a second appointment and return in several weeks for another shot, representatives with Clatsop Community Action said.

The county has begun to allow walk-ins at vaccination events involving the Moderna vaccine, but still urges people to sign up on the county's website to help ensure doses are available. As of Friday, 12,513 people — or 31.8% of the county's population — had been fully vaccinated.

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## Downtown association seeks new director

### Heath led group since 2016

By EDWARD STRATTON  
*The Astorian*

The Astoria Downtown Historic District Association is looking for a new executive director after Sarah Lu Heath took a job with the Columbia-Pacific Economic Development District.

Heath joined the downtown association 4 1/2 years ago, coming from a position with Restore Oregon, a statewide preservation nonprofit. Heath worked at the downtown revitalization programs, named her the Main Street Manager of the Year in 2019.

"It was really rewarding to take some of the vision of the

organization and have it come to fruition," she said.

During her tenure, Heath has gained a reputation for helping to shepherd historic preservation and housing projects. She secured facade improvement grants for the Riviera Building housing The Columbian Theater and the Odd Fellows Building that hosts Astoria Arts and Movement Center and several businesses. She helped attract Portland nonprofit Innovative Housing to restore the former Waldorf Hotel, also known as the Merwyn, into 40 new apartments for workforce housing.

Heath said she also took enjoyment from beautification projects long on the downtown association's docket, such as securing a grant to paint the 13th Street Alley.

"It amazes me that it does still bring a smile to my face every time I walk through there," she said.

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## After eight years in custody, Wirkkala adjusts to freedom

### Released from prison after murder retrial

By GARRETT ANDREWS  
*The Bulletin*

Luke Wirkkala was in only one fight in prison, sometime in early 2016, when he was two years into a life sentence for killing a man in Bend. He was attacked by his cellmate, a violent and unstable man who would sit on his bunk and laugh at nothing for hours.

One day, Wirkkala lost Luke Wirkkala stands on the bank of the Columbia River in Astoria.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

his patience and told the cellmate to keep quiet.

They fought viciously, exchanging wild swings and headbutts, crashing into the cell's metal fixtures, until guards cracked open the door and sprayed both men with mace.

A coughing, blinded Wirkkala was marched to Snake River Correctional Institution's bleak behavioral unit, where he would stay for 30 days.

After four days in isolation, he was given a shower. But the cold water reactivated the mace that had dried on his skin, searing his face, groin and other sensitive areas. It was some of the worst pain he had ever felt.

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