



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Clatsop County is seeking more resources for crisis response.

Wyden: 'What do we do when the world is not ideal?'

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Wyden, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said in a statement at a committee hearing on mental health care in June. "Health care providers like it, law enforcement likes it. The American Rescue Plan included a billion-dollar down payment to help states build their own programs like CAHOOTS.

"Now the Congress needs to consider what comes next to build these programs successfully and make sure people are getting the help they need even after the immediate crises end."

During a meeting with law enforcement, social services agencies and political leaders from the county and cities on Friday, Wyden said that while CAHOOTS is a model, it cannot be made into a cookie-cutter approach throughout the country.

The senator said he envisions flexibility and investment in multidisciplinary teams. The discussion on Friday, he said, was designed to hear from local leaders about what would be helpful.

Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, estimates that 12 clinicians are needed to cover the entire county 24/7. The mobile crisis team has four staffers trained in mental health counseling.

"I think the challenge is that our funding is often based on population and not on acknowledging the necessary infrastructure that we need just to get the job done," Baker said.

Differing opinions

There was consensus that more funding is necessary to address the growing number of crisis calls on the North Coast. However, there were differing opinions on where to start. Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones said the community needs a full-time shelter for people with behavioral health problems.

"Obviously, it would require some significant resources, which certainly the city of Astoria doesn't have," Jones said. "Nationally, locally, regionally, behavioral health treatment has been grossly underfunded for decades and that needs to change.

"And I would just add to that — that needs to not come at the expense of local law enforcement. Local law enforcement needs the resources it has to keep our community safe. So I would like to see the mental health deficits addressed with resources, not funding at the expense of law enforcement."

Astoria Police Chief Geoff Spalding said many of the city's crisis calls

involve people who are homeless.

"And we talk about all the things we want to do for our homeless population and if we don't address the mental health component of that, my personal feeling is that most of the other solutions aren't going to be effective," the police chief said. "And so for me, I think we really need additional resources to address a significant and growing problem in our city."

Sheriff Matt Phillips said that because there are people who are unwilling to engage in services, some end up in the criminal justice system.

"And that's a chance, I think, when we can maybe have an intervention," the sheriff said. "We need to have resources to provide treatment to someone while they're in custody. And certainly we're having challenges with that process."

Several people pointed to drug and alcohol abuse and the housing crunch as problems exacerbating the issue.

'Unrealistic'

Josh Marquis, a former district attorney, said another problem is that almost all of the money for mental health services comes from the federal government.

"... the county puts in exactly zero money of its own into mental health," he said. "That money comes from primarily federal and secondarily state funds. Now, on the other hand, asking the county to shoulder a big, big part of it would be unrealistic."

Gearhart Police Chief Jeff Bowman said that while a model like CAHOOTS may be nice, it does not address the elephant in the room.

"The root problem is why are we dealing with them to begin with out on the street?" he said. "Whether they're homeless or they're not medicated or whatever reason — that's the issue really that should be taken care of first. You can keep throwing money at us to take care of the immediate issue, but it doesn't stop the bleeding. The bleeding stops way before that."

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

"There is no question that in an ideal world the very first dollar should always be for prevention — no question about it," Wyden said. "The reality is what do we do when the world is not ideal?"

Refunds: 'It was just unfair'

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At the time, there was still too much uncertainty about what would be allowed under various pandemic-related restrictions, families told The Astorian. Besides, some of the students, now freshmen in high school who had spent much of the past school year isolated from their classmates, were no longer interested.

With travel dates still up in the air, many decided to cancel their plans with Educational Travel Services.

Now, families say they are struggling to get refunds from the travel company. Educational Travel Services contends it is simply following its cancellation policy. In light of the confusion, the Astoria School District plans to reconsider its own already limited involvement with such trips in the future.

In a statement to The Astorian, Katie Dunn, the president of Educational Travel Services, wrote, "We understand that families may be frustrated at how long the refund process is taking. However, through our own efforts we have obtained substantial refunds for our families. It was especially difficult to get some refunds back from certain vendors due to the disruption the pandemic has caused in the hospitality industry."

Refunds

Families who had purchased "cancel for any reason" insurance — something Dunn said the company always recommends — are entitled to a partial refund of the trip cost if they had already paid in full. Parents who had not purchased the insurance but had paid for the entire trip will receive smaller refunded amounts, according to Dunn.

For years, the company has organized the annual eighth grade trip to the East Coast and the school district has sponsored the travel.

The school district's role in the trips is minimal. Spon-



Jose Luis Magana/AP Photo

Astoria parents have had trouble getting travel refunds for student trips to Washington, D.C., that were delayed by the coronavirus pandemic.

sorship allows involvement of district staff on district time and students are able to use school facilities for fundraising efforts. Beyond that, the district left the details to the parents, middle school history teacher Matthew Hensley and, primarily, Educational Travel Services.

The school district did not completely restrict student travel during the pandemic, but travel requests were considered on a case-by-case basis, Superintendent Craig Hoppes said.

After the tangle between families and the travel company, Hoppes told The Astorian he plans to talk with the school board next school year about "getting out of the student travel business."

Hoppes understands how disruptive the pandemic was to businesses and schools. But, "whatever we do has to be for the benefit of the students," he said. "The second thing is: I think things need to be spelled out a lot more clearly to parents than they were."

It cost families several thousand dollars to buy a travel package for a student through Educational Travel Services — more if a parent also planned to travel with the group.

As families began to cancel with the company earlier

this year, they believed they were still within the allowed cancellation window and able to receive large refunds given the changing departure date. But even families who purchased travel insurance say they are seeing little if anything back.

When Megan Kindred let Educational Travel Services know she was canceling, she said she was told she would get back less than half of what'd she'd paid. Certain costs could not be refunded, she said the company told her.

Kindred was confused. She figured the airline could refund plane tickets in her daughter's name or issue credit for a future flight. She doubted the company had paid out money for much else yet. She asked for a list of the nonrefundable items so she could understand the travel company's justification. She said a representative told her this was against company policy.

Other parents said they made similar requests and received the same response from the company.

Kindred hired an attorney to try to get more information from the company. As far as Kindred knows, she's the only Astoria parent to hire legal counsel, a cost that could consume any refund.

"It was beyond the point of money for me," Kindred said. "It was just unfair."

Katie Lindstrom got some money back through her credit card company for trip-related expenses she had put on her card. She said she has had no luck with the travel company itself.

She would rather not be out more than \$3,000 with nothing to show for it. Still, her family can weather the loss.

But, she added, "I know there are some families that really scrounged their pennies to make this happen and that's really unfortunate."

Rutherford canceled her and her son's East Coast travel plans in March. She had canceled other travel and vacation plans because of the pandemic and was able to get refunds from hotels and airlines easily, she said. She is still waiting on Educational Travel Services.

Pandemic difficulties

The families The Astorian spoke with all said they understood the difficulties created by the pandemic, which hit many industries hard, especially the hospitality and travel sectors.

In a response to a customer complaint posted by the Better Business Bureau earlier this year, Dunn said Educational Travel Services had never seen anything like the havoc caused by the pandemic. She estimated the company lost two years of business as a result.

But any compassion the families in Astoria feel only stretches so far.

"I would hope that the Astoria School District would never do business with this company again," Lindstrom said. "In my opinion, they took money from eighth graders."

Kindred has no plans to use the company for a trip in the future.

"I wouldn't even consider it," she said. "For that much money, we could have taken the whole family."

Poet: 'I loved poetry from a very early age'

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"We fled. I was aged 3," he said, unable to recall what his parents took with them. "They had very little. We went overland in a horse and carriage to Germany ... the Germans took the horse!" His mother chided him for drinking water from the same trough.

The devastated German landscape was divided into Soviet, French, American and British sectors. "There were burned-out tanks and ammo dumps," said Puzauskas, whose family lived in refugee camps for three years.

Eventually, they resettled in England, where Puzauskas was schooled in a market town 70 miles north of London. "I loved poetry from a very early age," he said. "My English headmaster loved poetry and would read it for us."

Thirteen years of his boyhood passed waiting for permission to emigrate to the United States. He preserved the poetry he began scribbling as a 16-year-old when they arrived to join sponsoring relatives in Chicago. "I still feel I have a lot of poems to put out there," he said, flipping through handwritten wads of unpublished words as thick as his fist.

He anglicized his first name and graduated from Roosevelt University with a degree in English literature. He was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1969 for



Patrick Webb/Chinook Observer

Poetry has been a key part of the life of Andrew Puzauskas since his teenage years in England. While he has produced two books of poetry, he has many more unpublished pieces, all handwritten on scraps of paper.

two years. Stationed in Germany, he visited England on leave but never Lithuania, which was still under Soviet domination.

Later, Puzauskas moved to Vancouver, where his wife, Ruta, and two grown daughters still live. The GI Bill bankrolled his education. "I would model in clay

and make sculpture and vessels, and learned to draw and design," he said. "I took every art class I could possibly do, even though I didn't think I had the skills to draw accurately."

He worked for United Parcel Service for 19 years, marshaling trailers at Portland's Swan Island depot.

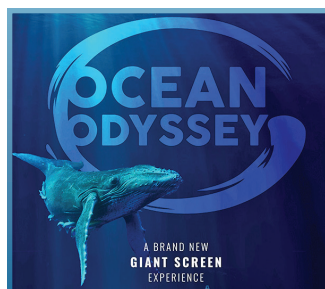
Later, he moved to Ocean Park to care for his ailing father and mother in their final years.

His modest home contains his ceramic creations and jewelry on lanyards that he sells at a booth outside a local grocery store. His bookshelves groan from the weight of nonfiction works on the search for meaning by the Dalai Lama, Khalil Gibran and Deepak Chopra.

"If I wanted to reread everything I have read, it would take 50 years and I am not going to live that long for sure," he said.

At 78, his birthplace calls. "I would love to travel over there," said Puzauskas, who laments he cannot translate his journalist father's journals. "My Lithuanian is at the level of an 8 year old."

His poetry books are published under the name Andrius Puzas. "I thought any Lithuanian seeing this would say, 'This guy is Lithuanian!'" he said.



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