

# Virus death: Most new cases involve the unvaccinated

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public health experts have said the delta variant is driving virus case counts.

In May, the county stopped providing demographic data on individual virus cases, such as sex, age range and broad geographic location. Instead, the county posts the virus case counts from the Oregon Health Authority on the COVID-19 Public Information Hub on the

county's website.

Most new virus cases in Oregon involve people who are unvaccinated.

According to the Oregon Health Authority's monthly report on breakthrough cases, 81% of the 12,514 reported virus cases statewide in July were among the unvaccinated. Ninety-one percent of the 55 people who died from the virus last month were not fully vaccinated.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

A softball diamond at Broadway Field is in need of repairs.

# Broadway Field: Has already exceeded a life expectancy of eight to 10 years

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"While the timing of this has certainly taken longer than ideal, it will stay on the forefront of our minds as we work toward a solution," said Skyler Archibald, the park district's executive director. "The staff of the district advise the board to continue pursuing a more balanced relationship with the other parties in this agreement while keeping the field open for community use."

With a Title IX settlement from the U.S. Department of Education in July, an additional element is thrown into the mix. The resolution between the Seaside School District and the Office for Civil Rights requires improvements to the softball field, bringing it to an equivalent level as the baseball field. School Superintendent Susan Penrod said the cost of the renovations will be paid by the school district.

Any proposed change to usage or policies governing usage requires approval of the three parties.

The park district, school district and city typically meet every other month and talk about a wide array of topics. "We've actually had multiple conversations over the past year or so about the field," Archibald said.

Celeste Bodner, a park district board member, said clarity is important.

"We need to be clear who is responsible for what so that we can inform the public that uses the field as to who to go to when they have something that needs to be done," she said.

According to the agreement, the city owns the land and is responsible for litter control and custodial services for permanent restrooms.

As part of its role, the park district contributed \$200,000 for field costs and provides ongoing field maintenance. This year, the park district budgeted \$12,000 for maintenance from the Broadway Field

Fund, about a third of the fund's balance.

The school district also paid \$200,000 for field cost. It is responsible for supervising time usage of the field.

According to a chart from the park district, the school district and their sports teams are the primary users of the fields, using the field almost two-thirds of the time in 2020 and more than 70% in 2019.

Seaside Kids, the park district and other recreation programs make up the remaining portion of field usage. "Almost every year, around 60% to 70% of the available time on the field are used by the school district," Archibald said.

While the field needs repairs, he said, the park district has delayed those fixes to ensure that an appropriate timeline is followed. Out of that fund, the park district is to pay "all the expenses for equipment repair and maintenance."

The field has already exceeded a life expectancy of eight to 10 years.

The agreement calls for the park district to establish a field replacement fund to receive money from user fees to help replace the fields. While the park district has a capital fund with some funds that could be allocated for replacement costs, it does not have a separate field replacement fund.

Revision of the agreement arose more than a year ago, when park district board members sought to limit what they saw as disproportionate field expenditures.

"This has been an item that has never left our mind but has recently gained some momentum as we are working to return programming and access to our pre-pandemic levels," Archibald said.

The agreement runs until 2051. It calls for the city, park district and school district to jointly review the agreement after three years and at least once every five years after.

# Needle exchange: 1.2M syringes

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The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states: "Nearly 30 years of research has shown that comprehensive (needle exchange programs) are safe, effective and cost-saving, do not increase illegal drug use or crime, and play an important role in reducing the transmission of viral hepatitis, HIV and other infections."

Last December, the Clatsop County program handed out its one-millionth needle. As of mid-July, the program had given more than 1.2 million syringes in return for 1.3 million, according to county figures. Participants often exchange multiple needles for multiple people.

In addition, county staff has distributed more than 4,000 doses of naloxone — a nasal spray that counteracts opioid overdoses — saving more than 300 lives. This year alone has already seen more than 120 of these reversals. This represents "a huge number for a county of our size," Melissa Brewster, a senior pharmacist at the Columbia Pacific Coordinated Care Organization, said in an email.

The spike in overdoses indicates the local drug supply is "much higher risk than (it) has been in the past couple of years," Brewster said.

In spring 2020, fentanyl — a potent synthetic opioid — was noticed on the North Coast. Overdose deaths in Oregon during those months increased by about 70% over comparable 2019 statistics, according to the Oregon Health Authority. The drug is now present in the majority of illicit substances, both methamphetamine and heroin, Brewster said.

The needle exchange crew saw this peril looming and began distributing strips that test for the presence of fentanyl, to "get people prepared to start testing their drugs more often and make it kind of like a norm for them," King said.

During the Thursday exchanges, program staff also asks participants if they want to connect with drug treatment and recovery, housing and health care, food and COVID-19 testing and vaccination.

## 'This stuff is complicated'

Some of the original fears about the needle exchange were never realized — for example, the worry that public parks and other kid-friendly spaces would see a significant rise in syringes left behind by drug users.

Although the Astoria Police Department still gets calls about found needles, the police were getting these calls before the syringe swap, according to Deputy Chief Eric Halverson. Neither the police nor the city's Parks and Recreation Department staff say they have noticed a difference in complaints.

The needle exchange wasn't universally supported when the county rolled out a six-month pilot program almost four years ago. Leaders in local law enforcement expressed skepticism that these type of programs are the wisest way to confront drug abuse.

Sheriff Matt Phillips said in a recent interview that communities need to balance compassion and outreach with not being "so permissive that we're enabling a behavior."

"In some regards, it has been effective as a harm reduction tool," he said. The sheriff pointed to fewer cases of conditions like cellulitis — a bacterial infection at injection points — showing up in emergency departments.

Phillips emphasized he does not oppose the program, and views the sheriff's office and health department as part of "Team Clatsop County."

"If the program is making a difference in lives, I support it," he wrote in an email. "If that isn't happening, or is creating additional problems ... then maybe we should reevaluate or modify the program."

"This stuff is compli-



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Harm reduction coordinator Jenna King holds a package of supplies for safe drug administration.

cated and we all have to work together on it."

Phillips said he is curious how many people, as a result of a referral from a needle exchange, enter drug treatment and recovery.

Brewster said that tying people who use the program to whether they seek treatment would "(violate) some privacy rules around protections for people with (substance use disorders)."

It would be difficult to draw conclusions about the program's impact over the last 18 months, Brewster said, as the coronavirus pandemic led to "staggering" levels of substance use.

The county also doesn't have a good way to measure the prevalence of syringe-borne diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV in the area, she said.

## 'The hope is just to plant the seed'

Before King became the county's harm reduction coordinator, she worked for Kerry Strickland's nonprofit Jordan's Hope for Recovery — named after Strickland's son, who in 2015 died of a

**'THIS STUFF IS COMPLICATED AND WE ALL HAVE TO WORK TOGETHER ON IT.'**

Matt Phillips |  
Clatsop County sheriff

heroin overdose. The non-profit dissolved in early 2020.

The needle exchange would, ideally, help people curb their drug habit, King said.

But when she's working out of the van — serving a population composed of both the housed and the homeless, people with families and those who travel alone — King has in mind a more urgent short-term goal: giving them what they need to stay alive. And this includes using that small window of time provided by the exchange to let them know what options are available for them.

"The hope is just to plant the seed so they're able to get to a point where they are looking for something dif-

ferent," King said. "But they have to keep coming to figure that out, and navigate that themselves."

By establishing what she calls a "stigma-free zone," King and her colleagues hope that those who rely on the exchange will be able to find their way sooner. "And, unfortunately, many people don't. That's the nature of addiction," she said.

On that record-breaking Thursday, King and Campbell had planned to show up about 15 minutes earlier but were slammed in Seaside and then in Warrenton.

Before that first visitor left, she asked through a mask if King and Campbell know how much their work is appreciated.

That the woman had masked up wasn't unusual. In general, King said, people who use the needle exchange have respected pandemic rules — covering their face, keeping their distance.

Neither was the woman's show of gratitude. Asked if they hear such things often, King replied, "Every single time we're out here. Every single time."

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