

OPINION



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editor@dailyastorian.com

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KARI BORGEN
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Editor

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Circulation Manager

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GUEST COLUMN

Lawmakers rethink approach to behavioral health

Oregon is experiencing a behavioral health crisis that is touching the lives of nearly every resident.

Many of us have directly experienced the difficulty of finding treatment for ourselves or a loved one. Others have witnessed the growing frequency and severity of individuals experiencing crises on our streets, and parents, teachers and students have seen the rising levels of behavioral challenges in our schools.



KATE LIEBER

We have all seen the problem, but our communities have not been equipped with the tools and the funding to respond adequately.

In 1995, Oregon closed Dammasch State Hospital with the promise that this was the start of a movement away from institutionalization, and toward community-based care for vulnerable Oregonians with mental health challenges.

Unfortunately, over the last 25 years we have not made good on this promise. We have not invested in a holistic system for behavioral health that can meet the needs of people in their own communities. People with behavioral health needs are “stuck” throughout the system — waiting for beds at the Oregon State Hospital, stuck in the State Hospital because they cannot be discharged due to a lack of community placements, stuck in jail, or homeless and thus with no way to recover.

Our state struggles with high rates of substance use disorder, overdose deaths and suicide. Mental Health America ranks Oregon 48th in the country due to our higher prevalence of mental illness and lower rates of access to care. Oregon has the 11th highest youth suicide rate in the United States, and from January to June 2020, at least 339 people died of a drug overdose in Oregon.

None of this is good. Oregonians need and deserve better access to quality, culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate services. Throughout the legislative session, advocates for patients, health care providers, hospitals and health systems all came to legislators with the same message: we need transformational change and significant investment to deliver adequate behavioral health care for Oregonians.

Here is how we begin to deliver. Voters approved Measure 110 in the fall of 2020, which moved \$200 million in funding to substance use disorder treatment, transforming the way we deal with addiction in this state. To properly confront the crises Oregonians



The Oregon State Hospital in Salem.

THE GOAL OF THESE INVESTMENTS IS TO CREATE A SYSTEM IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH THAT WORKS FOR PATIENTS ACROSS OREGON. ONE THAT IS SEAMLESSLY INTEGRATED WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE, WITH MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS, ‘NO WRONG DOORS’ AND AS FEW GAPS AS POSSIBLE.

face, we need to treat addiction and mental illness like medical conditions and not crimes — these investments are a big step toward that goal. The Legislature is fully committed to implementing this ballot measure.

Improved budget forecasts and federal aid also opened the door to finally think in a transformational way about behavioral health as a whole. With the help of advocates across the state, we were able to pass a \$350 million behavioral health package for Oregonians. The investment package broadly targets four main priority areas.

First, it will fill some of the gaps and support the community needs we already know exist, like expanding access to crisis services.

Second, it will fund a surge in our workforce, helping improve conditions for those already doing the work and attracting new workers from more

diverse backgrounds. This will lead to improved cultural and linguistically appropriate services, and help Oregonians find the behavioral health care they need — wherever they are.

Third, it establishes a fund for community innovation, where local stakeholders can determine the most pressing needs in their community. Too often we have approached behavioral health with a “one-size-fits-all” approach — these investments will allow local stakeholders to collaborate with others in their region and propose projects that will better serve patients and reduce the strain on the entire system.

Fourth, the package creates a transformation fund to align and transform the behavioral health system to ensure greater system accountability, outcomes and funding alignment, clear roles and responsibilities and ultimately sustainable funding for appropriate and quality services.

The goal of these investments is to create a system in behavioral health that works for patients across Oregon. One that is seamlessly integrated with physical health care, with multiple entry points, “no wrong doors” and as few gaps as possible.

We will know we have succeeded when patients have timely access to services at all levels, and when we see reductions in homelessness, emergency room visits, hospitalizations and overdoses. The transformation we need will not be achieved with these investments alone, as we expect more investments will be needed in future budgets, but this package will put Oregon on a path toward patient-centered care that is simple, responsive, equitable and meaningful.

With this approach we hope to look back on 2021 as the year we began true transformation of our behavioral health system. Over the next several years, as these investments take shape, we hope every Oregonian will begin to see the difference.

State Sen. Kate Lieber, a Beaverton Democrat, and Rep. Rob Nosse, a Portland Democrat, co-chaired the Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services during the 2021 legislative session. This guest column was originally published in the Portland Tribune.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Facing reality

Most of us value facing hard truths. Unfortunately, these days many people refuse to believe reality.

Republican leaders across the country are passing racist and anti-democratic laws to restrict voting in 20 states, with more planned, as the GOP clings to power despite being opposed by a majority of voters nationwide.

These same people, plus many others, are spreading lies about the Jan. 6 insurrection. They deny what we saw on television that day: The insurrectionists intended to stop Congress from counting electoral votes. They wanted to overthrow the election, and prevent the traditional peaceful transfer of presidential power.

Many Americans refuse to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has killed 4.3 million people across the world. They ignore centuries of science, and decades of research, that produced the vaccines, and predict future pandemics.

Your members of Congress need to hear from you. Urge them to pass the For the People Act immediately, to protect our right and ability to vote, end gerrymandering, limit campaign donations and more.

Urge them to support the U.S. House select committee investigating the insurrection and the misconduct by the Department of Justice under President Donald Trump.

Urge them to support full funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for national and worldwide vaccine development and distribution, and for much-needed relief for Americans across the country.

Your voice matters. Congressional contact info is at incoregon.org

We must face reality, and work together to make a better world.

Laurie Caplan
Astoria

Separated

From the dawn of humankind, we have known there is strength in numbers. Man was also quick to learn there was power for one who controlled those numbers. Many thousands of years later, this country was started by humans fleeing control. It has been written they were wanting to practice the religion their own way, without fear of persecution.

Less than 100 years later, the word was out about this place of grandeur but, more importantly, freedom of some type of overlord. Like all good things, with it comes the corrupted. But out of the American Revolution came words written into law. Since that time, the world has been using America as its gold standard for what a free democratic country looks like.

Why? Within 50 years Americans were burning people at the stake from fear of religion. Kidnapping hundreds of thousands, and forcing them into slavery, because of religious ideology. In every conflict this country has been involved in, religious judgment has been the cause. There’s no true religion that puts one human above or below another.

This small community has over two dozen different churches; that shows the diversity of beliefs this country has. That is why the U.S. Constitution makes a point to ensure the separation of church and state. Shouldn’t it be illegal for any religious group to solicit funds for a political agenda? The church already pays no taxes. Please keep our religion in politics apart for freedom’s sake.

Troy Haskell
Astoria



Hold the mayo

A recent article, “Port Commission Abacks letter of caution on sea otter reintroduction,” (The Astorian, Aug. 5) left me wondering what do sea otters have to do with the moribund Port of Astoria, or its tourist import operations?

Since all we have left is fisheries, fisheries and craft beer, I would imagine a sea otter sighting would be an additional thrill for the cruise ship visitors on shore leave, same as wild and free orcas are to the San Juan Islands. Such is the leisure business.

These newsworthy monkeyshines appear to be another example of a coma-

tose public agency held in thrall to the seafood lobby. What Sen. Jeff Merkley has proposed is only a study, another make-work for government bureaucrats and, really, one pipe dream is as good as another.

Why wouldn’t our Port explain to its constituency why sea otters could be a threat to port infrastructure? Put another way, is a viable otter population a potential threat to a nascent urchin fishery?

I am left wondering: What is news, or public relations stenography? And, to the point, what is the substance of the West Coast Seafood Processors Association letter?

I always get the drift, because it’s in the wind. But I pay a lot of money to support the Port, and all I really got from this news item was another baloney sandwich. Hold the mayo.

Gary Durheim
Seaside