

# the Astorian

149TH YEAR, NO. 88

WEEKEND EDITION // SATURDAY, JANUARY 22, 2022

\$1.50



Photos by Lydia Ely/The Astorian

A 'Thin Gold Line' flag to honor people who work in public safety telecommunications hangs in the Astoria emergency dispatch center.

## Challenges at 911 dispatch centers revive discussions of consolidation

### Staffing shortages, equipment problems create risks

By NICOLE BALES  
The Astorian

After more than 20 years of on-and-off discussions about consolidation, Astoria and Seaside are evaluating whether to combine emergency dispatch centers.

Sheriff Matt Phillips said the Clatsop County Sheriff's Office has strongly supported the concept for years and believes a single county-wide 911 dispatch center would be in the best interests of the public and emergency responders.

Staffing shortages at Astoria's dispatch center reached a critical point last fall, prompting the city to temporarily move operations to Seaside.

Astoria plans to resume normal operations in the coming months, but the temporary merger has pinpointed deficiencies in technology and interoperability that have left many emergency responders on the North Coast frustrated.

"The temporary merger of the two 911 centers has demonstrated the model can work," Phillips said in an email. "The merger also highlighted and brought to the forefront portions of the communications infrastructure which has failed, is failing or just didn't exist but needs to."

"The radio network needs to be fully linked and interoperable," the sheriff said. "Since the merger, the cities of Astoria and Seaside have been working diligently to accomplish this. A consolidation would maintain the interoperability and network capability that is difficult to achieve when the system is split in ownership and locations."



Staffing has been a challenge at the Astoria emergency dispatch center.

#### 'Wake-up call'

Staffing shortages have plagued emergency dispatch centers nationwide.

Astoria has not been immune. Over the past couple of years, the city's dispatch center has been operating with only a handful of dispatchers, requiring staff to work a significant amount of overtime each month.

Astoria dispatch handles emergency calls for 15 agencies, including the Astoria and Warrenton police and fire departments, the sheriff's office and rural fire districts.

Meanwhile, Seaside dispatch, which handles emergency calls for about half the number of agencies, has found stability in staffing.

Seaside dispatchers started traveling north to help in Astoria, but last fall the cities agreed to integrate Asto-

ria's four dispatchers in Seaside until new hires can be fully trained. With a new emergency communications manager hired in August and three dispatchers in training, Astoria expects to resume normal operations in May.

Under the temporary merger, Seaside went from dispatching for seven agencies in the southern part of the county to handling 911 calls countywide.

The merger, ideally, should have been a flip of the switch. However, the two dispatch centers are not completely interoperable, which revealed many gaps and resulted in frustration.

In Knappa, for example, dispatchers can hear firefighters over the main channel, but firefighters can't hear dispatchers.

See Dispatch, Page A6

## State discloses outbreaks at Seaside care homes

By ERICK BENGEL  
and GARY WARNER  
The Astorian and Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon Health Authority has disclosed coronavirus outbreaks at two care homes in Seaside.

Avamere at Seaside, on S. Roosevelt Drive, had 10 virus cases dating to Jan. 14, according to the health authority's weekly outbreak report. Suzanne Elise Assisted Living Community, on Forest Drive, had eight cases dating to Jan. 11.

Margo Lalich, Clatsop County's interim public health director, said that, as of Friday, Suzanne Elise had 10 virus cases associated with the outbreak.

In early August, Suzanne Elise had three virus cases. The outbreak disclosed in Thursday night's report is the first time Avamere in Seaside has appeared on the state's list.

Both facilities are owned and operated by Avamere Health Services LLC, based in Wilsonville.

Paula Nickles, an administrative assistant at Avamere at Seaside, said no one was hospitalized as a result of the outbreak.

Administrators at Suzanne Elise could not immediately provide a comment.

No other information was immediately available.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention singled out care homes as settings of special concern.

See Outbreaks, Page A6

## Liberty Theatre to launch new education program

Outreach financed by a \$100,000 donation

By ABBEY McDONALD  
The Astorian

When the Liberty Theatre's executive director, Jennifer Crockett, asked the staff how they should use a recent donation, she said the decision to start a new education program was unanimous.

In the hours before shows, staff sometimes have to call up friends to ask them to help out backstage, because there are few workers in the region with the technical skills needed to operate the rigging, lights and curtains.

With stage expansions and new equipment on the horizon, that worker shortage will become a bigger issue for the downtown theater.

"We were sort of like, 'How do we create this supply chain again?'" Crockett said.

See Liberty Theatre, Page A6

## Warrenton student selected for prestigious program

One of two students in Oregon chosen

By ETHAN MYERS  
The Astorian

WARRENTON — A student at Warrenton High School known on the North Coast for her outspoken and passionate activism has earned a new distinction.

Alejandra Lopez Nestor, who organized Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Astoria and Warrenton in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police in 2020, was selected to represent Oregon in the competitive U.S. Senate Youth Program.

"I was speechless ... I thought it was unimaginable being one out of two students chosen out of the entire state to represent Oregon," Lopez Nestor said. "... Once I submitted (the application), I didn't have high expectations for it. I thought my resume was great but I knew there were a lot of other students across

Oregon that were also really passionate about political change."

The merit-based program, founded in 1962, offers two students from each state the opportunity for an intensive weeklong study of the federal government and leaders. Caroline Gao, of Albany, was the other student selected from Oregon.

Lopez Nestor will join U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley — Oregon Democrats — for the program's 60th year during Washington Week, which is held in March. Typically, the students

See Student, Page A6



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Alejandra Lopez Nestor is a senior at Warrenton High School.

