

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## OUR VIEW

# Challenges for the next Astoria police chief

**B**ack in 2019, before the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police triggered Black Lives Matter demonstrations and calls to defund the police, the Police Executive Research Forum warned that police were facing a workforce crisis.

Fewer people wanted to become police officers, a report by the research forum found, and more officers were leaving the profession.

“Today’s police officers increasingly are being asked to deal with social problems, such as untreated mental illness, substance abuse and homelessness,” the report said. “As a result, the skills, temperament and life experiences needed to succeed as an officer are becoming more complex.”

Floyd’s murder in 2020 revived important questions about the use of force and the institutional racism within our criminal justice system. We believe the protests that followed Floyd’s death were necessary to raise public awareness about long-standing injustice, but the political climate has made the workforce crisis in policing worse.

In smaller, predominantly white cities like Astoria, the issues are often less about police misconduct and institutional racism and more about finding people interested in embracing the evolving role of law enforcement. The challenge is recruiting officers who have what former Astoria Police Chief Ron Louie describes as the “emotional intelligence” for the job.

As Astoria searches for a new police chief to replace Geoff Spalding, who is retiring, we hope the city uses Louie’s standard as a guide.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

### Clatsop County should have a single countywide 911 dispatch center.

Astoria benefited from Spalding’s maturity. He already retired twice before coming to Astoria in 2017, so he had more freedom to focus on being a good steward for the police department rather than polishing a resume for the next step on the career ladder.

Spalding steered the city’s homelessness solutions task force and took a thoughtful approach to crisis response. In our view, Astoria police are among the most effective on the North Coast at diffusing potentially volatile interactions with people living on the streets or having mental health or drug and alcohol-fueled breakdowns.

Much of the crime in Astoria, from assault to domestic violence to burglary to theft, is tied to drug and alcohol abuse and untreated mental illness.

Our next police chief should be a leading voice in policy discussions around treatment, social ser-

vices, housing and community outreach. With a stronger social safety net, police could concentrate more on crime than crisis response.

We have two policy recommendations for the new police chief and the city to consider.

**Crisis response:** A portion of crisis response calls should be diverted from Astoria police.

Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Clatsop County’s mental health and substance abuse treatment provider, has a mobile crisis team available to help police.

Astoria police and Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare are also in talks on a co-response model, where police officers and clinicians could respond to crisis calls together.

Over time, we believe a share of crisis response calls could be handled by clinicians.

Studies have shown that people struggling with untreated mental illness are at significantly higher risk

of being killed during interactions with police.

As The Astorian has documented, a small number of people account for hundreds of calls to Astoria police each year. Many are experiencing mental health or drug and alcohol-related problems that do not lead to arrest and criminal charges.

We recognize that careful protocols would need to be in place before calls can be diverted, but clinicians are more suited for some of these crisis response calls than armed officers.

**Consolidate emergency dispatch:** Emergency dispatch centers in Astoria and Seaside should be consolidated into a single countywide 911 dispatch center.

Studies and reports over the past few decades have urged consolidation. Our county is too small — and equipment is too expensive — to have separate dispatch centers.

We have heard the frustration from dispatchers who have to work long hours because of staffing shortages or devise workarounds for communications glitches. “We lose sleep on this at night. This is such an important system — that it works appropriately and accurately,” Spalding told The Astorian last month.

Having dispatchers under one roof could also make it easier to eventually divert more crisis response calls from police across the county.

We trust our city and county leaders can come up with a strategy — such as through the sheriff’s office or a new governing authority with representatives from police and fire agencies — to bring 911 under one umbrella.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Time and money

**J**ust to set the record straight: The primary reason that Astoria Forest Products left the Port of Astoria was the Port’s refusal to renegotiate AFP’s onerous lease, inherited from their takeover from Westlund Log Handlers.

The loss of an export facility has a hugely detrimental effect on every facet of the logging industry, and greatly devalues the asset for all timber owners, both large and small. Also, all peripheral suppliers lose a major customer.

Once again, the county gifts significant resources to the ports of Olympia and Longview, Washington. The time and money spent hauling wood out of county for processing and shipping comes at a significant cost.

The Port should demolish the Pier 1 building, which has been a white elephant since its inception, and turn Pier 1 into a drive-in/drive-out log processing and exporting depot. Clatsop County needs to stop being a Third World, colonial, plantation county for our neighbors’ benefits. The income to the county, across the board, would be enormous.

As is said, sadly, I don’t think the current Port administration or commission can “see the forest for the trees.”

CHRIS CONNAWAY  
Astoria

### ESP

*It was Super Bowl Sunday and the boys were quite heady. When the game started they were all ready.*

*Orders were given us not to disturb, it was 1976 and both teams were rated superb.*

*One turned 16 and said “no” to birthday cake, his 12-year-old sister lamented “for goodness sake.”*

*She said, “Mom let’s surprise the socks off of him.” So we baked a cake and frosted it with a whim.*

*The name of the winners and “Happy birthday John.” When the cake was all done, the TV was still on.*

*With 16 candles lit, we knocked on the door of the den. They sounded quite pleasant, and invited us inside, when ...*

*Only they knew the winners and couldn’t believe our words. They wondered if we were a couple of “nerds.”*

*He said how did you know that without a TV? His sister just smiled and said, “Don’t*



‘I TAKE IT YOU WEREN’T PLANNING ON GOING TO CHURCH ON SUPER BOWL SUNDAY, BILL...’

## LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer’s name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in response

worry we have ESP.”

MARIAN OLSON  
Yuma, Arizona

### Art can help

**I**believe art can help make a difference. I’m a cartoonist, and when the

to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at bit.ly/astorianletters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR., 97103.

COVID-19 pandemic started, I founded a group on Facebook called Artists Unite, rallying artists of all kinds, all over the world, so they can use their artistic gifts to spread hope to all who are suffering from COVID-19, show the world artists are heroes like doctors, truck drivers, grocery store clerks and a host of others, and with luck, bring the pandemic to a suc-

cessful end.

It is almost two years now, and we are still living in fear, but I know art can help, for it brings hope and reason, because even though several had disregarded it to be sufficient, art actually had helped us for thousands of years now, like during World War II. I know artists are heroes, for now artists had become martyrs for the sake of the world because of them using art against the evil pandemic.

This pandemic has taken too many lives, even artists, not just by the virus, but by force! And not just our lives, but our livelihood. Art will help, for art is a gift of life, for art is life, and that’s what we’re trying to save and bring back: Life!

Art is just as powerful as all the vaccines, and art can save lives, too, and this nightmare needs to end now. If any other artists wish to join the cause for life against COVID-19, they can join at this link: facebook.com/groups/artistsunite23

DYLAN DUVALL-MILLIREN  
Seaside