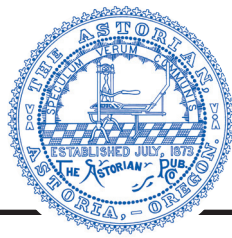


OPINION



the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘So when does it become illegal to be human?’

Five years after Astoria created a homelessness solutions task force, the city has made little progress.

Volunteers, advocates and nonprofits have stepped into the gap between talk and action through outreach like the Astoria Warming Center at First United Methodist Church, Helping Hands in Uniontown and LiFE-Boat Services on Commercial Street.

While the warming center and Helping Hands have faced challenges, LiFEBoat, which opened last summer, has been the focal point of backlash at a time when homeless people have become more visible downtown.



DERRICK DePLEDGE

“We need to fix the health care infrastructure in this country if we ever want to make any headway on our houselessness issue,” said Osarch Orak, LiFEBoat’s executive director.

Orak brings his own experiences with homelessness and crime in Portland and Astoria to his outreach work.

LiFEBoat Services includes Filling Empty Bellies, a meal program for the homeless, and Beacon Clubhouse, a members-only space for people with mental illness. LiFEBoat is working toward providing year-round overnight shelter for the homeless.

In an interview, Orak discussed some of the criticism LiFEBoat has encountered, the city’s homeless camping ordinance, the need for a year-round shelter and the wisdom of chronic nuisance or exclusion zone ordinances.

Q: LiFEBoat Services opened last August downtown. What’s the biggest lesson you have learned over the past year?

A: We tried to be as inclusive as possible, introducing ourselves when we first moved in to let people know exactly what we were going to be doing down there and giving people options on who contact if they had issues.

Which, of course, they didn’t. They went straight to the police and 911, writing letters to the mayor and what not.

I guess the biggest lesson is to stay off social media, for me. It never helps to try to shoot back, no matter how productive you’re trying to be. Social media is never a good medium for trying to work stuff out.

Q: There was some early criticism of Filling Empty Bellies when volunteers were providing free lunches in the parks because the outreach did not link homeless people to social services. Now that LiFEBoat is providing links to services, we are hearing complaints that it’s a magnet drawing more homeless people downtown. Do you think providing social services will increase the number of homeless people in Astoria?

A: Absolutely not. It hasn’t. There is no proof — that’s not a thing.

Q: Where do you think that comes from?

A: It’s all fear — fear-mongering.

People look at other cities, especially the bigger cities, and they don’t want that to happen here. And it’s never going to.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Osarch Orak is executive director of LiFEBoat Services, which provides outreach to the homeless.

‘WHERE IS YOUR LINE FOR WHEN THIS PERSON IS NO LONGER WORTH THE AIR THEY BREATHE AND THE SERVICES THAT EVERYONE ELSE — FOOD AND SHELTER AND ALL OF THE ABOVE? WE NEED TO FIX THE HEALTH CARE INFRASTRUCTURE IN THIS COUNTRY IF WE EVER WANT TO MAKE ANY HEADWAY ON OUR HOUSELESSNESS ISSUE.’

Osarch Orak | executive director of LiFEBoat Services

At the peak, when we had lot’s of people hanging out over here, it was nowhere near any of the big cities.

I was born and raised in Portland. If you go to any of the major cities, including Portland, you see homelessness. You come into Astoria, you don’t really see it — it’s far and few between.

We do have a problem. I’m not going to deny that we have an issue. It’s just not compared to the big cities.

Q: Astoria, like many cities, is figuring out how to allow homeless camping. Federal court rul-

ings — and state law — make it difficult for cities to prohibit homeless people from camping in public places when there are not adequate shelter beds available. What are your thoughts on how the city has approached this so far?

A: I think the new ordinance is basically another do-nothing. It’s unhelpful, as I stated on our social media. Unhelpful at best.

You’re just going to throw some more tickets at people who can’t afford to pay them. It’s just a way for them to be able to move people along some more.

That’s not helpful. It’s not going to accomplish anything.

Q: Why do you think Astoria is not pursuing a year-round homeless shelter to provide more shelter beds?

A: It’s too much of a hot topic. None of the elected officials want to go anywhere near it. They don’t want to touch it with a 10-foot pole because it’s political suicide in this county.

Honestly, I feel like they’re hoping we’re going to do it, which, we are. The technician’s over drawing plans up for a sprinkler system so that we can do it legally.

So that’s coming soon. We will be doing overnight stays year-round.

Q: The former police chief and the former city manager have talked about the shift in public attitudes toward homelessness over the past year or so. The shift tracks to when homeless people became more visible downtown. You have certainly heard the criticism at LiFEBoat. How has this influenced your work?

A: It’s definitely made it hard. We’ve had to spend a lot of time putting out fires and just spreading the actual truth of the matter.

And the fact of the matter is that homeless people became more visible downtown when they started pushing them out of the woods. They had huge encampments up there, and I know because when I was homeless, I stayed up there a couple times.

But they got pushed out of the woods, and where else are they going to go?

Q: Part of the frustration that we have heard from business owners, residents and some in law enforcement involves a small number of homeless people who consistently cause problems. At what point, when there are services available, is it fair to say “enough” and to look at chronic nuisance or exclusion zone ordinances?

A: That’s a hard question to answer. So many of them, especially those ‘chronic nuisance’ individuals, have extreme, severe mental illness that we aren’t able to address.

So when does it become illegal to be human? Where is your line for when this person is no longer worth the air they breathe and the services that everyone else — food and shelter and all of the above?

We need to fix the health care infrastructure in this country if we ever want to make any headway on our houselessness issue.

Derrick DePledge is editor of *The Astorian*.



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 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.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Many times over

Another Fourth of July, another mass shooting. Given the circumstances, there will be more such shootings, many times over, until we get the changes that most Americans want.

My military friends report that every service member has personal responsibility for every weapon issued to them. If any weapon is neglected, misused, or diverted, the service member is personally and firmly held accountable. There is no room in our military for the lax standards introduced to the civilian gun market by recent decades’ Supreme Court decisions.

Initial reports from a Chicago-area colleague whose relatives were in the area included this one: “Veterans of Foreign Wars were in parade nearby when shooting started, recognized immediately that it was gunfire, and started running towards it to get people to safety. God

bless our veterans, each and every day.” Amen!

God bless all who volunteer for dangerous duty, in order to protect the common good. Their sacrifices for others will save our nation and community!

DAVE CUNDIFF
Ilwaco, Washington

A treat

I just saw the Peninsula Association of Performing Artists (PAPA) production of “Letters to Anne of Green Gables.” What a treat! We are so fortunate to have such an amazing troupe in our midst. Year after year, they mount productions that would be impressive even in a big city, but they’re right here in the charming and historic theater at Fort Columbia.

This year’s production is no exception. A departure

from the usual musical fare, this play is new (2019), and is based on the beloved children’s books. It features a young girl of today, who discovers the life lessons found in Anne’s letters as she’s poking around in the attic of her new home. The trials and tribulations experienced by young people growing up are timeless, and remind us that we have more in common than we think.

The entire cast was fantastic, but I need to single out Glenn Ripley, who has been a part of PAPA for years, but only recently has joined the performers. I hope he will continue, because he really touched my heart with his portrayal of “Matthew,” Anne’s adoptive father figure. I highly recommend getting yourself some tickets before the show closes on July 31. You won’t be disappointed!

IVONA SCARBOROUGH
Long Beach, Washington