

Bills seek to improve safety in Oregon prisons

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Oregon corrections officers worried whether an inmate has infected them with a fluid-borne disease could get some relief under new legislation.

State Sen. Bill Hansell, Republican from Athena, is pushing Senate Bill 367 in the upcoming Legislature to allow doctors to reveal if inmates who expose corrections staff to bodily fluids have diseases, including HIV and Hepatitis C. Those doctors could then treat staff right away if there is a possibility of infection.

Jeff Coffman is an officer at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Pendleton, and president of the union local representing security staff. Oregon prisons have about 200 fights a year involving inmates and staff, he said. Inmates can spit toward staff and throw their urine and feces as well. Inmate fluids getting on staff, Coffman

said, "happens all the time."

According to Department of Corrections statistics, one in 200 inmates has HIV and one in three has Hepatitis C.

But currently, neither officers nor their doctors can find out if an inmate has a blood-borne disease, because of federal laws protecting personal medical information. Staff can take a "cocktail" of antibiotics, which they may not need and can make them sick for days. Or they can seek a petition from state courts to compel an inmate to provide a blood sample for disease testing. That process can take weeks.

"The longer you wait to take the cocktail, the less likely it is to help," Coffman said.

Hansell's Senate district includes the Pendleton prison and Two Rivers Correctional Institution, Umatilla. He said he met with Coffman, fellow corrections officer Bryan Branstetter of Pendleton and others to hear their concerns about safety behind prison fences.

"What this bill does is provide a quick response between doctors," Hansell said. "It's a matter of getting the right information quickly and at the same time not getting into what would otherwise be private."

Under the bill, an officer's doctor, for example, could find out from the corrections department whether or not an inmate had a communicable disease. Armed with that, Hansell said, the doctor would be able to treat the officer while not revealing the inmate's medical information.

Hansell said his meeting with corrections representatives also resulted in Senate Bill 366, which establishes mandatory minimum sentences of four years in state prison for an inmate who assaults staff.

Branstetter recalled when an inmate assaulted him some years ago during lunch. The investigation revealed the attack was a gang-ordered hit. The inmate, Branstetter said, received a sentence of two

years and a month for the assault.

Inmates already serving a long sentence might consider that a payable price for trying to take down a corrections officer. But adding on another four years could make someone rethink such a move.

"We want to make sure it was something substantial enough that before I haul off and smack a staff member, there are consequences for the action," Branstetter said.

"You do the crime, you do the time," Hansell said. And if serving an extra four years for attacking staff stops an inmate, "it will accomplish its purpose."

Other significant public safety bills:

•State Rep. Greg Barreto is the chief sponsor of House Bill 2380, which makes it a crime to threaten to create a mass injury event and comes with maximum penalties of a \$125,000 fine and up to five years in prison. The Republican from Cove said the bill stems from the two La Grande High School students who

plotted in April 2016 to conduct a mass shooting at the school. He said the bill makes it easier for police to examine a suspect's computer and internet use to prevent a tragedy and gives the law some teeth for punishment.

•Hansell's Senate Bill 369 would require employees of strip clubs to report if they have reasonable belief sex trafficking is occurring or minors are performing at the premises.

•And Senate Bill 370, another from Hansell, directs the Oregon Department of Justice to conduct a study on prosecuting pimps who send sex workers outside the state. Hansell said the sex workers bear the risk of breaking the law, while the person controlling them might be operating in a Portland office and not facing arrest or prosecution.

"What this bill is doing, is if you illegally transport sex traffic outside the state and you're not with them, you will be held accountable," he said.



Staff photo by Tammy Malgesini

Weather wrecks havoc on Highland Avenue
After a water main broke in the 900 block of West Highland Avenue in Hermiston, part of the street had to be dug up to make repairs. Ron Sivey, street superintendent said, when the weather allows, a crew will restore the street.

HERMISTON

New Hispanic Advisory Committee chair looking forward to challenge

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian



"I want to educate the Latino community to be optimistic and not have so much fear."

— Jose Garcia, Hispanic Advisory Committee chair

Fighting addiction in the community is a passion for the Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Committee's new chair.

Jose Garcia was chosen as the committee chair at the end of November after former chair Eddie de la Cruz moved to Texas. He is also the director of New Horizons, which serves those struggling with problems such as drug and alcohol addictions, gambling, anger management and domestic violence. He hopes to use his professional skills to help the Hispanic Advisory Committee look for ways it can assist in addressing those challenges.

"We do have some issues in the community, and I think we can work on that," he said.

Garcia said he has enjoyed getting to know city councilor Manuel Gutierrez, who acts as a council liaison to the committee. Gutierrez also works in human services through Domestic Violence Services.

"He's got a lot of ideas," Garcia said. "We've been having some preliminary talks. With his expertise and my expertise, maybe we can do some classes, educate some people."

Past board chair Eddie de la Cruz said Garcia is a "great guy" who has been involved in the community for a long time, and people do not need to worry that under Garcia's watch the Hispanic Advisory Committee's efforts will flag.

"They've still got a lot of good plans. The committee is still going strong," he said.

Past initiatives have included increasing voter registration and increasing involvement in education, and Garcia said he also wants to keep those things going, including a popular effort to partner with the Hermiston School District to provide Spanish translators for parent teacher conferences.

He said he also wants to help Hispanic children in the community connect to more financial aid resources for pursuing higher education.

Garcia said parents come to him all the time, worried their child might be doing drugs or upset about confirmed drug use. He said when parents get involved in their child's

education, grades go up and attendance improves, which helps children stay away from drugs and gangs and other harmful behaviors.

The problem, he said, is that many Latino parents are working multiple jobs to make ends meet or give their children a less impoverished childhood than they had. They don't always have the luxury of arranging their work schedule, as Garcia has done while raising his three children, so that they can drop them off and pick them up from school each day.

"A lot of the factories and warehouses around here, they're not family-oriented," he said.

Parents feel powerless over that, he said, just like he sometimes feels powerless to help people turn their lives around when it takes four months to get someone into rehab. Garcia said he lost his own brother to addiction a few years ago for that very reason.

That feeling of powerlessness is a reason that Garcia has been drawn to Donald Trump over the last year. While many Latinos have rejected Trump for his rhetoric about building walls and mass round-ups of illegal immigrants, Garcia said he finds hope in Trump's message about fighting for everyday Americans and helping those in our own backyard.

He said he wants to help calm fears by reminding Hispanic community members that Trump needs Congress to approve many of his proposals and that he ran

his candidacy on a pledge to help the working class.

"I want to educate the Latino community to be optimistic and not have so much fear," he said.

Garcia said he also wants to help the Hispanic Advisory Committee be more connected to the city council, and to make sure the committee is helping support "great" projects like the new, free bus system in town. He said he wanted to keep fostering new leaders in the Hispanic community and encouraging them to be more actively involved.

Garcia moved to Hermiston from Yakima in 1989 and said he really appreciated the growing opportunities he had working as a drug and alcohol addiction counselor for Umatilla County when he first came to town.

"I really thank the county for the product I am today," he said.

He said people he worked with in that job always told him he needed to learn to say no, because he would say yes no matter what new project or meeting was added to his plate. But he can't help being a go-getter willing to tackle any problem, he said.

He has been frustrated by the last two Hispanic Advisory Committee meetings being canceled due to weather, but plans to take the same go-getter approach with the committee.

"They say you can be part of the problem or part of the solution," he said. "Today I can tell you I'm part of the solution."

BRIEFLY

Grange postpones Saturday breakfast

PENDLETON — This weekend's all-you-can-eat breakfast at White Eagle Grange has been rescheduled.

Gail Wilson said there aren't enough volunteers to hold the event. The breakfast will be Saturday, Jan. 28 from 6-10 a.m. at 43828 White Eagle Road, located off Highway 395 between Pendleton and Pilot Rock. The suggested donation is \$7 for ages 8-and-older, \$4 for ages 5-7 and free for those younger. Those who bring two nonperishable food items will receive \$1 off. The donations will be distributed to local food banks.

For more information, contact Wilson at 541-310-9655, 541-276-3778 or gail1wilson@gmail.com.

Second lead test shows levels below EPA standards

PENDLETON — A second round of testing at the Pendleton Technology and Trades Center, the former West Hills Elementary School, revealed that there were no more water sources above the Environmental Protection Agency's action level, a Pendleton School District press release states.

The first round of testing revealed that two sources were above the action level, spurring the district to remove one source and retest the other.

HERMISTON

Council to consider 15 percent increase on water, sewer rates

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Hermiston city council will consider a water and sewer rate increase during their meeting Monday night.

The proposed plan would raise rates by 5 percent in March, 5 percent in October and 4.9 percent in March 2018. The average user's water bill (assuming 11,220 gallons per month) would increase \$1.39 in March 2017 to \$29.22 and the average user's sewer bill would increase \$1.18 to \$24.74 during the first step of the increase.

According to a memo to the city council, the increases were calculated "based on an analysis of the utility system's operating expenses, debt service and capital improvement needs." Those capital improvement needs include new de-watering equipment at the recycled water treatment plant to improve efficiency and implementing "remote-read" water meters instead of the manual ones that currently take two full-time employees to gather

data from each meter individually.

On Monday the council will consider approval of a re-alignment of parking spaces along the north side of Gladys Avenue between NE Second Street and NE Third Street. The change, discussed at the council's Jan. 9 work session, would add four more parking spots to the area in front of Hermiston Public Library by changing the parallel parking spaces to diagonal ones.

Also on the agenda for Monday is a recognition of former Hispanic Advisory Committee chair Eddie de la Cruz, approval of new city committee members, formal adoption of the state's newest building codes and approval of the December financial report.

The 7 p.m. meeting at city hall, 180 NE Second St., will be preceded by a joint work session at 6 p.m. with Umatilla County commissioners on the progress of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.

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