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REPORT

Oregon suicides drop in 2020

By JIM REDDEN
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon had the nation's 13th highest suicide rate across all ages in 2020, a slight improvement the year before when the state was ninth in suicide deaths, according to suicide mortality data recently published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Part of the decline was a reduction in suicides by young people, the Oregon Health Authority said Tuesday, March 22. The decrease placed Oregon 18th highest in the nation — an improvement from 2019 and 2018, when Oregon ranked 11th highest in the nation for youth suicides.

"While we are encouraged by 2020's downward trend that shows our work with partners to address youth suicide is helping in some counties, we still have a long way to go to improve outcomes among all Oregon communities," said Oregon Health Authority Behavioral Health Director Steve Allen.

State health officials cautioned Oregon suicides still are well above the national average, however. And preliminary data for all ages combined indicate an increase in the number of suicides in 2021.

"Racial and economic inequalities impact the overall health of many of our communities and we have much work to do to alleviate this injustice. Our hearts grieve alongside the Oregon communities and families that have experienced suicide loss."

Oregon was one of seven states that showed a decrease in suicide rates between 2019 and 2020, according to the CDC data released in February. The state had 18.3 deaths by suicide per 100,000 people in 2020 with a total of 833 deaths. In 2019, the suicide death rate was 20.4 per 100,000, which amounted to 906 total deaths.

As documented by the recently released Youth Suicide Invention and Prevention Plan annual report, the number and rate of suicides for youth age 24 and younger decreased in 2020 by nearly 14%, from 118 deaths in 2019 to 102 deaths in 2020.

Preliminary 2021 data for Oregon indicate a three-year decreasing trend in suicide numbers for youth age 24 and younger. While Oregon's youth suicide deaths have decreased, it must be noted that Oregon's youth suicide rate was much higher than the national average for the years preceding the decrease, state health officials said.

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'We tried to save each other'



Sharon Gaines/Contributed Photo
Cody Watson, pictured here during a bowhunting trip, was injured in a fall July 2, 2021, near Pilot Rock, and died before rescuers could save him from a narrow canyon. Watson, a member of the Oregon Army National Guard, loved outdoor activities and planned to become a military pilot.

Fall from waterfall brings complex challenges for first responders

Editor's Note: This is the first of a two-part feature. Look for the conclusion in the East Oregonian in print and online Tuesday, March 29.

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

PILOT ROCK — One day last July, three longtime friends headed to the mountains to cool off in a swimming hole. They never imagined one of them would never make it home.

The young men — Kyler Carter and Braydon Postma, both 23, and Cody Watson, 21 — had a close-knit friendship. They'd bonded as young boys in Pilot Rock, playing ball, tag and climbing on the jungle gym. In later years, they hunted and hiked in the mountains, tubed in McKay Reservoir, participated in sports and played competitive games of Call of Duty: Black Ops II.

Basically, said Carter, "We were brothers."

The tragic adventure began last July 1 on a sunny afternoon. The three waited until Watson got off work and then rode in Postma's pickup about 10 miles south of Pilot Rock into the mountains. The destination was a picturesque spot they'd visited dozens of times — a swimming hole on West Birch Creek above a cascading waterfall that spills into a steep rocky canyon. They parked and walked about two miles to a deep pool where they swam, talked and took photos and videos. The rocks near the edge were slippery with moss.

What happened next is both a blur and a succession of still frames in their minds.

"I fell first," Postma said. "Cody tried to save me. Then Kyler tried to save Cody."

Carter described the moment even more simply.

"We tried to save each other."

All the men survived the initial fall, but Cody Watson would die before help could arrive.

To honor Watson, Umatilla County's

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OREGON GUBERNATORIAL RACE

Republicans promise victory through conservatism

New faces and recognizable names among 8 who take the stage in Pendleton

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — There wasn't much daylight between the eight candidates on stage at a Tuesday, March 24, Umatilla County Republican Party gubernatorial forum at the Pendleton Convention Center.

The candidates generally agreed they were going to reverse the policies of Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, the state should move to a school choice model, the Second Amendment needed to be protected and all government mandates needed to be repealed.

The candidates didn't get much time to expound on their thoughts. The size of the field — West Linn political consultant Bridget Barton, Hillsboro retiree Reed Christensen, Tigard entrepreneur Nick Hess, Baker City Mayor Kerry McQuisten, Bend marketing consultant Brandon



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Oregon Republican gubernatorial candidate Nick Hess and seven other contenders expressed their views during a forum Thursday, March 24, 2022, at the Pendleton Convention Center.

Merritt, White City massage therapist Amber Richardson, Redmond contractor Bill Sizemore and former Alsea School District Superintendent Marc Thielman — had only 30 seconds each to answer most questions.

But all candidates still got a shot at making their case to a good-sized audience in Pendleton. The candidates were mostly polite with one another but occasionally took shots at some of the candidates who weren't in Pend-

leton, which included many of the field's top fundraisers: former state House Minority Leader Christine Drazan of Canby, Salem oncologist and 2016 Republican nominee Bud Pierce, Sandy Mayor Stan Pulliam and former state representative and Oregon Republican Party Chair Bob Tierman of Lake Oswego.

Oregon hasn't elected a Republican governor since 1982, but each candidate explained how they would be the one to reverse the trend.

Barton stressed to the audience both her experience advocating for rural Oregon and her status as an "outsider." She told the audience that she would work hard in Salem to advance their priorities.

"I'm here to tell you that I would stand in front of a train for you," she said.

As governor, Barton said she would immediately replace the state's deputy superintendent of public instruction, who leads the Oregon Department of Education.

Christensen said the most important issue was to end Oregon's vote-by-mail system in favor of a one-day, in-person election so the state could get "election integrity."

He also highlighted his participation in the attempted insurrection in Washington D.C. in 2021. Christensen faces federal charges for assaulting Capitol police.

"I was arrested by the FBI," he said. "I'm currently in the system. I care."

In almost all of his answers, Hess said he would work to make Oregon government more transparent and listen to residents instead of lobbyists.

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