

Oregon seeks nearly \$40M in aid for hospitals, nursing homes

By **JEFF MANNING**
The Oregonian

SALEM — Two state agencies will ask the legislative Emergency Board for nearly \$40 million to help ease what they describe as a staffing and financial catastrophe that's left hundreds of patients in limbo.

Officials from the Oregon Health Authority and the Department of Human Services hope the money will address what they are calling the post-pandemic health care crisis. A full-blown exodus of nurses and others out of the health care field has blown a hole in hospitals' financial models.

Oregon hospitals collectively lost \$190 million in the first quarter of this year. They don't expect the second quarter, completed at the end of June, to be better.

Nurses say they are leaving the field because they're

tired of the risks posed by COVID-19, the danger posed by erratic patients and the constant demands by management to do more with less.

St. Charles Health System reported a \$48.6 million loss for the first quarter of this year, according to unaudited financial statements.

The staff shortages are a double whammy for hospitals and nursing homes. They must replace the departed nurses with temporary help that costs much more.

Plus, they don't have enough staff to handle the patients. Emergency room patients can wait days before a bed opens up, which clogs the whole system.

But it gets worse when nursing homes and skilled nursing centers refuse to take patients ready to be discharged from the hospital because they too lack the staff to care for

additional residents.

An estimated 600 patients in Oregon are in this health care limbo. They are generating little if any revenue for the hospitals and they're taking up a bed that normally would be allocated to a new patient with immediate medical needs.

The Department of Human Services is seeking \$25.7 million from the state general fund and \$2.6 million in other monies. The money would pay for "incentives" to long-term care facilities to accept those stuck hospital patients.

The additional funds would pay for nurse crisis teams to help nursing homes hit hardest by staff shortages. It would generate new higher reimbursement for adult foster homes that accept some of these patients. And it would create a provider relief fund to save nursing homes and other facilities facing insolvency.

State to take steps to reduce the risk of suicides at Astoria Bridge

By **ERICK BENGEL**
The Astorian

ASTORIA — After a series of tragedies and close calls, the Oregon Department of Transportation plans to take steps to reduce the risk of suicides at the Astoria Bridge.

The state does not keep an official count, but several people have leaped off the bridge in recent years.

In January, a 29-year-old Astoria man died after jumping off the bridge and landing on the grass east of Suomi Hall.

Another man with a history of mental health issues scaled the bridge twice this year.

One night in late July, a Kia was found abandoned on the bridge, blocking the northbound lane. The owner is listed as a missing person, Oregon State Police said.

"The Megler Bridge is a draw for suicide or suicide attempts," Monica Steele, the assistant Clatsop County manager, said in August at a Public Safety Coordinating Council meeting.

County leaders recently met virtually with state transportation staff to discuss a range of options.

In the near future, the department will post bridge signs with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, the new national suicide-prevention number, according to Mark Buffington, the department's district manager on the North Coast.

The department also might enlarge a deck-level gate, currently topped with barbed wire, that allows



Ed Hunt/For The Astorian, File

The Oregon Department of Transportation in August 2022 reported it plans to take steps to prevent more suicides at the Astoria Bridge, including installing signs with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, the new national suicide-prevention number.

access to the top of the span. People have managed to bypass it and ascend the steps to the bridge's highest point.

Other bridges, such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, have had netting installed to help catch people who jump. At the Astoria Bridge, the cormorant population could pose problems.

"I'm afraid that if we put netting down, we create a platform for nesting," Buffington said. "But it is in discussion."

Fencing may be another option, though a retrofit would be years away.

"There's currently no funding for that type of change," Buffington said, adding, "It would be a major construction project."

The Astoria Bridge, completed in 1966, was designed to bear a certain

weight and withstand winds of a certain speed. To add fencing to the superstructure would require the department to study the feasibility and engineering.

Steele told the Public Safety Coordinating Council that the county would work with its lobbying firm to find potential funding for a study.

Another idea from the meeting is to post signs telling drivers to call 911 if they see someone walking on the bridge, an action considered trespassing. Current signs caution pedestrians not to walk on the span and offer suicide counseling.

The Department of Transportation can be reluctant to put up nonstandard signs. The department tries to adhere to the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, Buffington said.

OREGON BRIEFING

Lewis & Clark student killed when column collapses

PORTLAND — A masonry column collapsed on the Lewis & Clark College campus Monday night, Aug. 29, killing one student and injuring two others, according to the college and Portland Fire & Rescue Bureau.

The student killed is a 19-year-old man, and the two students injured are both 18-year-old women.

Investigators learned

six people were in three hammocks that were attached to four free-standing columns on the campus when one column fell inward toward the students, according to Portland Fire spokesperson Terry Foster. Two students were in each of the three hammocks, Foster said.

Fire and ambulance crews were called to the campus shortly after 8:15 p.m. on reports of multiple people injured due to a collapsed brick column.

The 19-year-old man was not pinned under a column

but appeared to have been struck by the column that fell, Foster said. The column was about 9 to 10 feet tall, and 20-by-20 inches, he said.

One 18-year-old suffered injuries to her arm, and the other 18-year-old injured sustained abdominal injuries, according to the fire bureau.

Both women who were injured were taken to Oregon Health & Science University Hospital for treatment.

Aug. 29 marked the first day of classes for the college's fall semester.

— *The Oregonian*

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