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Wendy Krause
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“In our first six months of the program, we were single coverage and we were just in Florence proper,” Severance said. “We needed law enforcement backup for single people responding. Starting this week, we’re going to have double coverage. We’re going to expand out and cover all of western Lane county.”

When the pandemic hit, it was thought that calls would increase, but instead, they were flat.

“The ambulance numbers, interestingly enough, were down as well. People were afraid to have contact with others and to get the help that had other people dependent on coming to their home,” Severance said.

In April, the call volumes

younger people,” Severance said. “We see a lot of younger people attempting or contemplating suicide.”

She did not see an uptick in completed suicides, which appears to be remaining steady. But the early thoughts of contemplation

phetamines in this community,” Severance added. “I’d say those are probably the biggest problems. We probably get calls two-to-three times per month, and that’s fairly steady.”

The largest problem she is seeing is with alcohol abuse, which occurs across all age groups.

“I would say that a good portion, maybe 40 percent, use alcohol consistently or define alcohol as a problem for them,” Severance said. “I see a lot of alcoholism.”

Many of those struggling with alcohol and suicidal thoughts are also struggling with mental health conditions

such as depression or bipolar.

“There are people who have not sought services and have not been diagnosed,” Severance said. “A lot of times people will try and self-regulate their moods through drugs and alcohol. That then masks the symptoms, and it becomes hard to know if the symptoms are due to alcohol or an underlying bipolar situation. A lot of people are undiagnosed.”

While each call MCR receives is unique when it comes to causes, “It’s always complex, with multiple issues,” Severance said.

But the one thing that all people need right now is hope.

MCR works with multiple local programs for people, from counseling to AA to financial help during the pandemic.

Severance mentioned grants from Siuslaw Outreach Services (SOS) that can help pay utilities, as well as the Christmas in June program, which is continuing to raise funds to help those financially struggling through the pandemic. People can call organizer Sam Spayd at 541-991-6139 for more information on the program.

“What we try to do is get people started at one point. We try and take it one step at a time to try and stop that snowball effect and turn things around. It’s never simple. It’s very hard. It’s going to take time,” Severance said.

She also stated that reopening business can help as well, getting people back to work.

“I’m sure it will help,” she said. “I can’t put a number to that. We’re certainly not seeing any fewer, in terms of numbers, people who are struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts. I don’t see a decrease in those numbers yet. But again, things are just beginning to reopen.”

But reopening Oregon after the shutdowns has had a difficult beginning, as can be seen with the older population of Florence.

“I think the elderly have probably adjusted better to the limitations of the pandemic than the younger people,” Severance noted.

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“I think the pandemic has exacerbated all of those things for people, just in terms of how hopeless they feel about being able to recover. ... A good number of them have lost their jobs. They are sometimes underemployed, unemployed and can’t support their families. They are needing to go back to live with their family, or divorce. It’s a combination of factors where their life has fallen apart.”

— Lori Severance,
Mobile Crisis Response Team

started going up, and June marked the busiest time for the MCR in its history. At that point, MCR staff members were able to see a broader picture of mental health in the region.

“The kinds of people that we are seeing are those struggling with suicidal thoughts,” Severance said.

Before the pandemic, the Siuslaw region already had a high suicide rate. Oregon’s highest rate of suicide is men aged 85 and older, which makes up a good portion of the retirement community of Florence.

“I think we have a lot of people here, and a lot of retired older veterans who have health issues,” Severance said. “According to the statistics, that seems to be our main risk factor with people here.”

In the past three years, Severance has responded to 35 suicide completion calls.

“That’s about one a month. Our region is very high,” she said.

However, since the pandemic began, those calling with suicidal thoughts have skewed much younger.

“Our team is seeing much

can turn deadly if issues are not addressed.

“A good number of them have lost their jobs,” Severance said. “They are sometimes underemployed, unemployed and can’t support their families. They are needing to go back to live with their family, or divorce. It’s a combination of factors where their life has fallen apart.”

“I think the pandemic has exacerbated all of those things for people, just in terms of how hopeless they feel about being able to recover.”

While each circumstance is unique to each individual, Severance stated that issues are compounding for younger workers in the community. First, they lose their job, which in turn can cause them to lose their relationship or create instability in their housing situation.

“They start drinking or using drugs,” Severance suggested.

As for the types of drugs, she stated that callers have not reported issues with marijuana.

“I think we have a good size problem with metham-

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