

EDITORIAL

Legislature:
Pass Ezra's
law this year

The Oregon Legislature's session that started Monday is limited to 35 days, but lawmakers should be able to find time to pass Ezra's Law.

That's the unofficial name for House Bill 4122.

It would make it more likely that people who physically harm their victims to the extent that the damage is permanent will be punished appropriately.

The bill's namesake is Ezra Jerome Thomas, a 4-year-old boy from Madras. When Ezra was 2, his mother's then-boyfriend, Josue Jair Mendoza-Melo, beat Ezra, leaving the toddler unable to breathe on his own and reliant on a wheelchair.

Mendoza-Melo was convicted of attempted murder and criminal mistreatment and sentenced in September 2019 to 12 years in prison, with the possibility of parole.

Ezra's Law would include the potential imposition of a penalty more commensurate with the kind of life-altering crime that Mendoza-Melo committed — non-reversible effects that in Ezra's case could last for the better part of a century.

The law would call for a 25-year prison sentence, with no parole, for a person convicted of committing assault or attempted murder that causes permanent physical damage.

The idea is similar, but not identical, to Oregon's Measure 11, a law passed by voters in 1995. Measure 11 sets mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain felonies, including murder and other violent crimes.

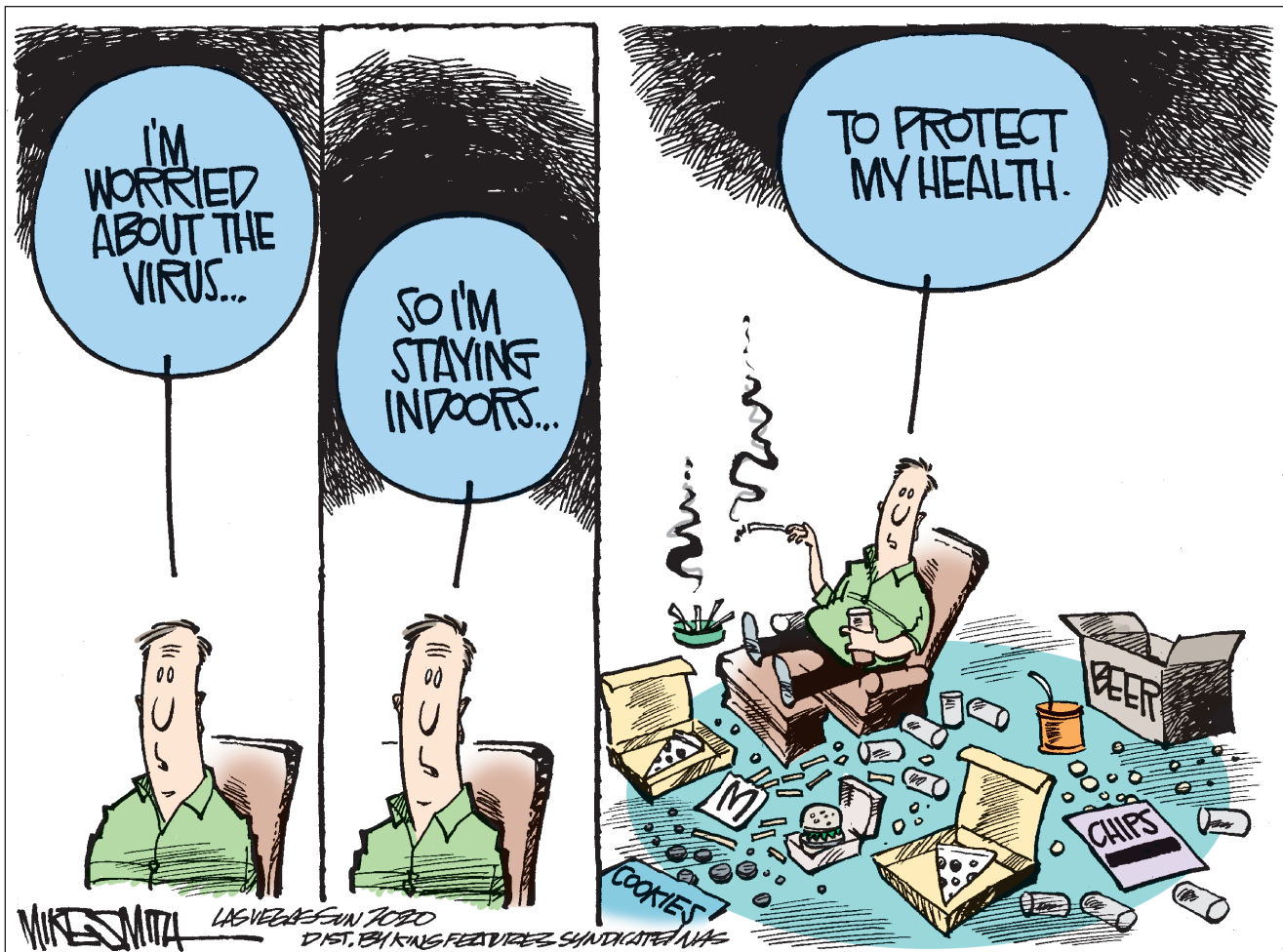
Ezra's Law, unlike Measure 11, would give judges some discretion in sentencing. Judges could eschew the 25-year sentence, for instance, for defendants who haven't been previously convicted of a similar crime, or if there are significant mitigating factors. Judges could also allow for the possibility of parole.

That's a reasonable amount of latitude to give a judge.

But Ezra's Law also would make it possible for a judge to punish criminals such as Mendoza-Melo in a more appropriate way. The reality that he's likely to be freed from prison before Ezra graduates from high school, is an affront to the concept of justice.

It's understandable that we generally reserve the most severe penalties for people who take someone's life. But Ezra's Law recognizes the unfortunate reality that sometimes victims, even though they survive, can never recover some of what was taken from them.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Flu: Worse than coronavirus

The new coronavirus outbreak is dominating headlines. More than 7,700 people have contracted the pneumonia-like illness since it was first reported last month, and more than 170 have died. China has imposed a quarantine for over 50 million people. The U.S. has confirmed five cases, all among travelers, and the State Department has issued advisories that warn against travel to China.

While government institutions mobilize to contain the spread of this new disease, Americans should keep in mind that there is a virus right here in our country that will sicken and kill many more people this year: influenza.

The influenza virus causes the disease commonly known as the flu. This winter, it has already affected at least 15 million Americans and led to 140,000 hospitalizations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 8,200 Americans have died this flu season. That number is expected to rise much higher before winter ends. During some recent years, nearly eight times that number, up to 61,000 Americans, have died from the flu.

Concerns about coronavirus bring to mind the spread of SARS two decades ago. In the early 2000s, SARS caused worldwide panic as it spread to over 26 countries. But compare the number of deaths from flu to the much-feared SARS, caused by a coronavirus that is related to the one implicated in this new outbreak. In all, SARS resulted in at least 8,000 illnesses and 774 deaths. The flu affects up to 5 million people and kills 650,000 around the world each year.

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Much of the concern around SARS was its contagious potential: One person could spread the virus to two to four others. The new coronavirus is believed to have a similar contagion pattern so far. While this necessitates strict adherence to infection control protocols, it's important to keep in mind that other viruses also have a high potential for rapid spread. One person with measles will spread it to an average of 18 to 20 people, while someone with influenza could spread the virus to someone six feet away through direct contact or by coughing and sneezing.

Unlike for the new coronavirus, there are proven vaccines against the flu and measles. The seasonal flu vaccine is safe and protects against the types of influenza viruses that are predicted to be most common during each season. Most years, the vaccine is effective against up to 60% of influenza strains. The CDC recommends that every person over 6 months old receive the flu vaccine, unless they have specific medical reasons not to.

Yet vaccination rates remain low. Less than half of Americans receive it, with rates in some recent years dipping to less than 40%. One survey found that one in four people report not getting the vaccine because they think they are unlikely to get sick from the flu. The rise of the anti-vaccine movement has also resulted in the highest number of cases of measles in the U.S. since 1992.

As new information is uncovered

about the recent coronavirus outbreak, we can take steps to avoid the diseases that we can prevent. It's not too late to get the flu vaccine. (Make sure to update other vaccines too.) Encourage family, friends and peers to get vaccinated, as well. While influenza is deadliest among children, older adults, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems, no one is protected from the virus without vaccination. Take simple measures, including cleaning communal surfaces; avoiding touching your nose, mouth and eyes; and washing your hands frequently with soap and warm water.

None of this is meant to make light of emerging diseases. SARS would have been much worse without the vigorous efforts of the international community. Governments need to do much more to understand and control the new coronavirus outbreak. Americans should continue to heed travel advisories and guidance from public health officials.

But we should also call attention to a pathogen that will cause many more illnesses and deaths this year. After all, what will sicken us and our loved ones is much less likely to be the novel virus from afar than the disease that spreads among us already, year after year.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Disinformation can affect voters of all stripes

Editorial from The Sacramento Bee:

Jon Favreau and Melissa Melendez have little in common.

He's a former speechwriter for President Barack Obama and co-hosts the staunchly anti-Trump "Pod Save America." She's a Trump-supporting Republican Assemblymember.

But they found some common ground in 2020. Both helped spread falsehoods about California's primary election on Twitter.

We recently criticized Melendez for spreading a rumor that California is stripping voters of their rights. A fact check by The Sacramento Bee found that Melendez was "echoing inaccurate sentiments spread within conservative circles across the state that California elected officials are purposefully disenfranchising Republican voters by switching them to no party preference without consent."

After heated criticism, Melendez

seemed to abandon her crusade against the nonexistent conspiracy. But Favreau inadvertently helped revive a version of it last week.

On Thursday, he shared these sentences with his 1.2 million Twitter followers:

"California is purging 5 million voters from the rolls" and "You can't vote in the California Democratic primary unless you're a registered Democrat."

Both claims, made in a tweet by Peter Miller, a researcher for the "Pod Save America" HBO show, are inaccurate. The state does remove inactive voters from the rolls — including dead people, nonvoters and non-California residents — but the lack of context gave a misimpression. In addition, non-Democrats can vote in the Democratic primary.

Miller's tweet, retweeted by Favreau, racked up over 400 shares and likes. Enter Sam Mahood, 29, the press secretary for California's secretary of state. He immediately

rebutted Miller.

"Neither of these things are true," tweeted Mahood. "Please delete this tweet, it's just spreading misinformation."

Fighting misinformation has become a full-time job for Mahood.

"It's one of the biggest problems we face in our election in 2020," said Mahood. "Things are heightened because of the presidential primary."

Some of the confusion stems from the process by which "no party preference" voters can vote in party primaries. NPP voters must take the extra step of requesting party ballots. The state is making efforts to ensure NPP voters know how to do so.

And since the Republican Party has barred NPP voters from participating in its primary, anyone wishing to vote Republican must register as a Republican.

Some voters have expressed surprise at finding out they are registered as NPP, but there's zero

evidence of malfeasance. These voters likely declined to designate a party preference when reregistering to vote and then forgot. The changes may also be due to clerical errors or other easily fixable mistakes.

Main point: California encourages all voters to participate in elections and you can even register to vote, or switch parties, on Election Day.

On Twitter, Miller tried to defend his claims but received fierce pushback from journalists, voting experts and state officials. He finally relented, deleting his tweet. This caused it to disappear from Favreau's influential page, but neither made immediate attempts to set the record straight.

In an interview, Favreau said he retweeted Miller then got on a plane to Iowa that didn't have WiFi. By the time he landed, Miller's tweet had been deleted.

"Clearly, Peter made a mistake," said Favreau.

Asked whether he should issue a correction, as a newspaper would, Favreau demurred. Shortly afterward, Miller tweeted a correction: "Yesterday I tweeted that CA was purging millions of voters ... CA SOS pointed out that it was misleading, so I deleted the tweet. Sorry about that!"

The muck up came during the launch of Vote Save America, a national effort to register and engage voters. It's a laudable program, but it will take more than voter registration links to protect election integrity in 2020. All of us must guard against misinformation, and anyone who spreads it should issue a public correction, as Miller finally did.

"If you're not sure about something, ask questions," said Mahood. "Elections people are here to help. If you're confused by something, don't jump to conspiracy theories."

All voters, regardless of political party, should heed this advice.