

OUR VIEW

Employment Department computer issues are continuing

State auditors were in the middle of an audit of the Employment Department's computer upgrade when the pandemic hit. Auditors put it on hold. They didn't want to put more strain on the department as it struggled to handle thousands of unemployment claims.

But a letter to the department from auditors last week had two themes. The department has done a good job recently in planning the upgrade and adhering to state procedures.

Encouraging.

It also said: "However, the program faces significant risks."

Worrying.

A legislative report had already highlighted the history of the failure to upgrade the system after the last recession. The auditor letter reinforces those concerns.

The phrase "significant risks" in the auditor letter is common in reviews of complicated projects. What matters is how the employment department responds. Does it take the risks seriously?

Is that needless worry on our part? We don't think so. We'll tell you why. There are two reasons.

Sometimes Oregon government does not take such warnings seriously. In 2013, we read the monthly, independent consultant reports about a project known as Cover Oregon. They were filled with warnings colored red and labeled risky about pulling off the state's health insurance website exchange by its fall deadline. We spoke on the phone with the project's director about the reports at that time. He reassured us that that was just the kind of thing such reports do. Then-state Sen. Dennis Richardson (he later became secretary of state) raised similar concerns. Cover Oregon flopped and cost the state about \$300 million.

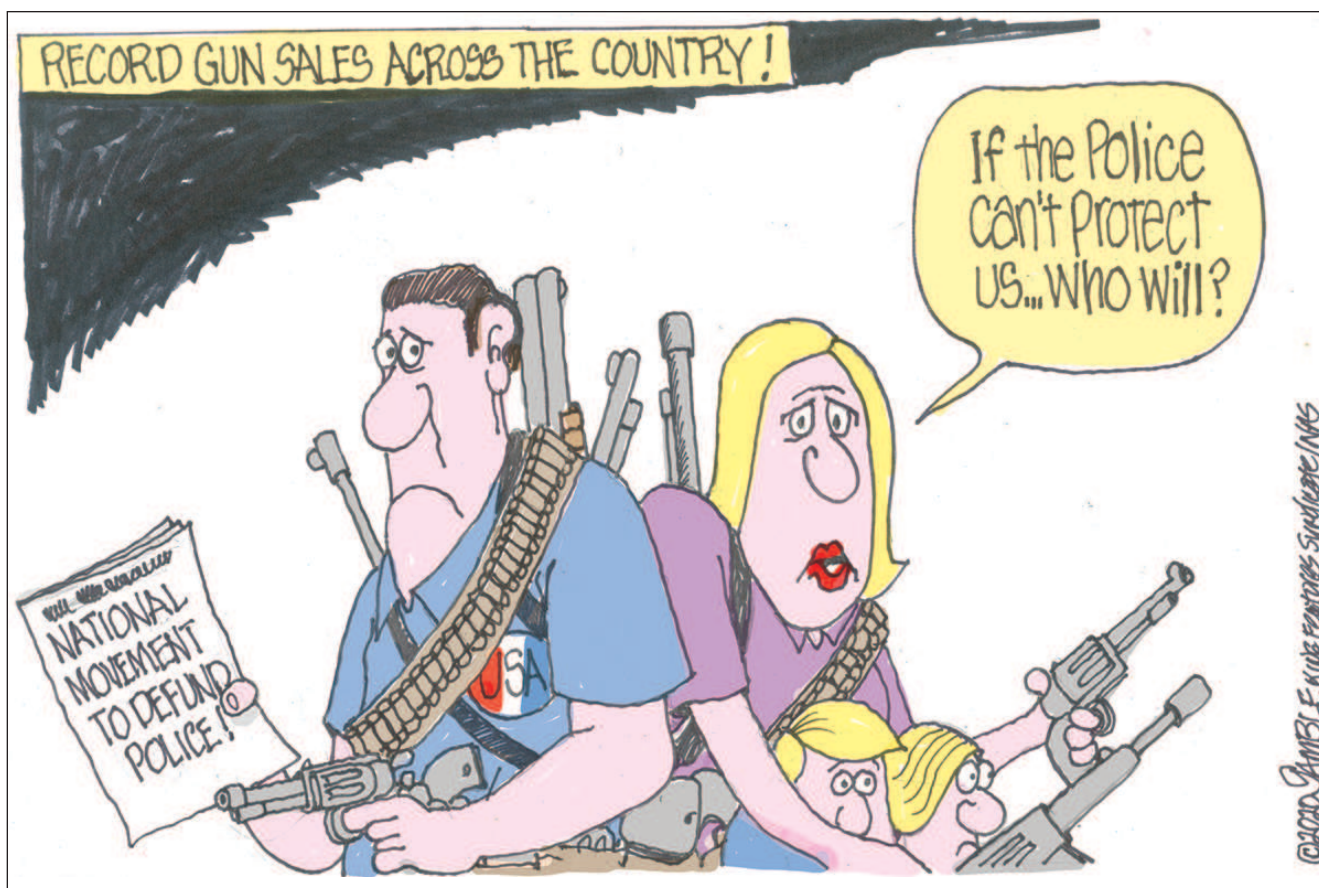
The second reason is that the state has known about the computer problems at the employment department for a long time. Previous state audits highlighted them years ago. "Those audits predicted the problems OED is now experiencing with unemployment claims if the modernization project was not carried out promptly," State Sen. Kim Thatcher wrote this week. She is a Republican who is running for secretary of state.

We should note the bulk of the auditor's letter addressed issues that the department has seemed to get right. It then mentions at least two risk areas. One is personnel. Staff turnover has been a recurring problem for the computer upgrade. And there has been more turnover recently. "From January to April 2020, staff filling six positions on the Modernization Program team have left, though two of these positions have since been filled. In addition, on July 1, 2020, the OED Modernization Director left the program," the letter points out. How can the department pull off this project if it can't keep key staff?

The other key risk area identified in the letter is the timeline. It's difficult to estimate the timeline on complicated, technological upgrades. That's no surprise. But it can lead to unanticipated additional costs, particularly as the department struggles to cope with the workload from the pandemic.

Unemployed Oregonians are not getting their unemployment checks in part because the department did not successfully carry out the upgrade of its computer system after the last recession. Oregon legislators and Gov. Kate Brown need to do a better job of tracking the upgrade's progress. Take the significant risks seriously.

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Don't take police from schools

George Floyd's tragic death prompted national protests against police brutality and then a chorus of calls to defund police departments. The movement swept up school district officials, some of whom are removing armed officers from public schools.

Yet it wasn't a gun that killed George Floyd. The video of his death lasted an excruciating 8 minutes and 46 seconds and is seared in the national consciousness.

But parents and educators would do well to recognize that the Floyd video was 6 minutes longer than it took Deputy Jimmy Long to stop a 19-year-old with a gun at a Marion County, Florida, school on April 20, 2018.

Earlier that year, on Feb. 14, a student gunman took the lives of 17 students and adults in Parkland, Florida. A "National School Walkout" to protest gun violence was organized to take place April 20, the anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre in which two students killed 13 people and wounded nearly two dozen others.

Just four hours north of Parkland, students at Forest High School were preparing to leave the building as part of the walkout when a gunshot rang out. A former student had entered the premises and shot a 17-year-old.

Deputy Long, a school resource officer, "ran towards where he thought the noise came from," said Sgt. Paul Bloom, director of public information for the Marion County Sheriff's Office. "That's what you train for and you hope you never have to deal with, but they (school resource officers) are there to protect the children."

Had Long not been on campus, April 20 might have marked another somber anniversary.

JONATHAN BUTCHER

The Minneapolis school board has, for years, considered removing school resource officers from district schools. While unrelated to schools, Floyd's death prompted the board to officially sever ties with law enforcement last month. Portland, Oregon, schools followed. According to reports, school officials in California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Washington and Wisconsin are considering similar moves.

Floyd's death was brutal, but demands to remove school resource officers after this event suggest that police are the problem — a perspective that is easy to take until a troubled individual with a weapon walks into your child's classroom.

Over the last 25 years, the number of school resource officers in schools has nearly doubled, often with approval of school communities, according to surveys. A 2013 Congressional Research Office report found that, based on the research available, "the expansion of SRO programs coincided with a decrease in reported serious violent victimizations of students while at school and generally lower numbers of violent deaths and homicides at schools."

Cameras and smartphones are virtually everywhere, so videos of aggressive officers go viral quickly. Yet federal data shows that some 1.4 million incidents involving criminal activity happen in schools every year, which means thousands of incidents that officers handled properly go without a headline for every problem with a school resource officer.

Parents and policymakers must still address the troubling examples of officers abusing their position, however, and after the Parkland shooting in 2018, state officials emphasized the training programs available to officers assigned to schools. The Federal Commission on School Safety, formed that year, heard copious testimony on the importance of such training.

The Commission's final report listed programs in Texas, South Dakota, Arkansas, Indiana, Virginia and Ohio, to name a few. Surveys of school resource officers — including a 2014 survey of Minnesota police — demonstrate that officers want this training, especially in the areas of counseling and mentoring students.

Lawmakers should be wary of federal proposals to standardize school resource officer responsibilities or evaluations, and families should object to across-the-board elimination of the officers from schools. Law enforcement agencies certainly have best practices to share, but the 2018 Federal Commission was correct to say "the problem of school violence is long-standing and complex" and there "can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach."

Specific training can help, along with removing the comparatively few officers that harm students. In Florida, Deputy Long reacted immediately and relied on what he had been taught. Sgt. Bloom says Long "did what he was there for and sworn to do. The parents of those kids are glad that he did."

And they would have been devastated had he not.

Jonathan Butcher is a senior policy analyst in The Heritage Foundation's Center for Education Policy.

Your views

Oregon's mail-in elections should be national model

In 106 days from today there will be the Nov. 3 presidential election. No matter where you stand on who you want to see in this country's highest office, likely you deem it important that the ballots — in all 50 states — are handled properly. Oregon's mail-in ballot elections have been around for

20 years. Results are usually within 24 hours. I believe it would be of great value that we each contact our Senators Merkley and Wyden, and Oregon's Secretary of State Bev Clarno asking that they bring up Oregon's successful election process to the attention of the nation. We are all in this together.

Linda Bergeron
Halfway

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Writers must sign their letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com.

OTHER VIEWS

Everyone should heed precautions

Editorial from The New York Daily News:

Even as Walmart gets with the public-health program and requires masks in all its stores nationwide, even as Alabama's Republican governor belatedly issues a mask mandate, even as an anti-mask Oklahoma governor tests positive for COVID-19, cleverer-than-thou twentysomethings here in America's first and deadliest coronavirus epicenter are back to having devil-may-care parties without social distancing.

We say to them what we said to the ultra-Orthodox Jews who defied

restrictions during the worst of April's agony: Cut it out. You're going to get people killed.

Already, New York City officials report that infection rates among 20-29-year-olds rose 43% between mid-June and the end of the month. Now, Gothamist reveals that "Multiple ... underground parties have been taking place every weekend in the city, spread via WhatsApp chat groups and text chains with promoters asking people not to publicize the illicit events."

The jig is up. No, COVID-19 isn't especially deadly for young people. But these revelers have parents and grand-

parents and friends, some of whom work in hospitals and nursing homes.

Fingers crossed and knock on wood, over months of pain and sacrifice, New York has managed to contain the virus; it is now finally reporting single-digit daily fatalities and citywide positive test rates that bounce between 1% and 2%. No one has the right to squander that hard-won progress: not Floridians, not Texans, not fellow New Yorkers who consider themselves invincible.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has a Health Department. He should send them to the scene of these crimes in progress and start handing out the fines.