

Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Tracking homeless deaths

Oregon can't understand how acute its homeless issue is without good information. The state does not even uniformly track how many homeless people die each year.

Senate Bill 850 sets out to change that. It has moved forward in the Legislature. It should become law.

The bill makes what seems like a relatively small change. It's already state law that a report of death is required to include the person's address at the time of death. The bill requires that the report for a person who was homeless state the person's address as "domicile unknown."

Most counties across the country do not track homeless deaths. Multnomah County was one of only 68 counties and cities in the United States that did, according to a 2020 study by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

Formally tracking the deaths more closely will get us a better understanding of how COVID has impacted the homeless, as the Oregon Law Center pointed out in its testimony on the bill. It will also enable Oregonians to see the impact of homelessness on the state's mortality rates.

Jimmy Jones, the executive director of the Mid-Wilamette Valley Community Action Agency of Salem, told legislators that "the average age of death in the Salem homeless community is just 52." The homeless often have chronic and manageable conditions, but because they are homeless and have trouble getting access to treatment and shelter, they die.

Oregon should better track its homeless deaths. Pass SB 850.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the Baker City Herald. Columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the Baker City Herald.

Your views

Culley is right on immigration

I would like to congratulate Steve Culley for his letter, "America needs immigration control, not immigration reform," published in your paper on April 6. Steve's letter was well-written and to the point on how our federal government should be handling immigration. At present Joe Biden is doing nothing to control the ingress at our southern border with Mexico. I have never seen such a lack of border control in my lifetime.

Gary L. Johnson
Haines

OTHER VIEWS

Biden: look beyond China for solar panel material

Editorial from The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

During President Joe Biden's first week in office he signed an executive order directing the federal government to, where possible, procure goods and services within the U.S. before turning abroad. Later, when he announced his \$2 trillion American Jobs Plan in Pittsburgh in March, the president called for investing \$100 billion in solar and other forms of renewable energy.

These are good ambitions, but there is a conflict.

Polysilicon is a key material in

the manufacturing of solar panels. It's the substance that generates electricity from sunlight. The global solar sector has concentrated about 40% of its polysilicon production in the Xinjiang province of China, which is under scrutiny for human rights violations including forced labor and "re-education camps" for its Uighur Muslim population.

The Biden administration must be aggressive in its championing of human rights by looking elsewhere for its solar materials.

This will be no easy feat, as China produced just over 80% of

the world's polysilicon in 2020.

There are American manufacturers producing their own materials, but not nearly enough to keep up with the increased demand Biden's plan calls for if it passes. Therefore, federal and state government should buy American where possible and develop plans to incentivize domestic polysilicon production.

Since American production is not currently up to demand, we should turn next to other international manufacturers in places such as Canada or South Korea,

both of which host polysilicon producers.

At the same time, the U.S. should use its influence as a potential large-scale customer to pressure the Chinese to abolish forced labor practices.

Some lawmakers are leading the way in the public pressure campaign. Sens. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., have asked the U.S. Solar Energy Industries Association, the national trade association for solar energy, how it and its member

companies have responded to allegations of human rights violations in Xinjiang, asking for details about how the companies are ensuring that the materials are not being made using forced labor.

Additionally, eight Republican senators have introduced legislation to ban the use of federal funds to purchase solar equipment from Xinjiang. Such a ban could cripple the U.S. expansion of solar power, but if no alternative presents itself and the violations do not stop, it could become necessary in the short term.



Face masks are still crucial protection, but not everywhere

By Mariel Garza

With nearly 40% of people in the U.S. having received at least one shot of COVID-19 vaccine, you may be wondering if now is the time that California and other places ditch the mask mandates and free the people from the tyranny of having to breathe in our own smelly coffee breath.

The answer is: no way. What are you, a misanthrope?

But also, yes, it is time.

Let me explain. Until we reach the point where either enough people are vaccinated against COVID-19 or the only SARS-CoV-2 variant in circulation is no more dangerous than pink eye, mask mandates are one of our best defenses. And since we now know with confidence that transmission is primarily happening indoors, dumping mandates for enclosed public places like factories and airplanes would be reckless.

But it's entirely reasonable and, frankly, rational to relax the outdoor face covering rules as we head into warmer weather. There's very little point in forcing people to continue covering up to take a stroll down the street, hike in the park or sunbathe on a beach, which is still the law in California, when the risk of infection spreading this way is so low as to be negligible.

Now before anyone blasts off an angry note accusing me of being a COVID-19 denier, I'd like to point out that I was an early mask adopter during this pandemic, covering up outside even before it was fashionable. At that time, scientists weren't sure how COVID-19 was spreading, and some health officials were actually telling people to not use

masks. But to me it just made sense to throw up a curtain between the access route to my respiratory system and the potentially dangerous microbes in the air.

It's pretty clear that some of the things we thought in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic weren't quite right. For example, the virus didn't end up spreading via surfaces. It wasn't only sick people who were capable of spreading infection. Bleach injections were not promising infection deterrents (to be fair, only one elected official actually suggested that). And it didn't spread much, if at all, in outdoor locations.

"There are estimates that suggest maybe 1 in 1,000 infections happen outside," Dr. Ashish Jha, a general internist and dean of Brown University's School of Public Health, told National Public Radio on Wednesday. And those are estimates, rather than documented cases of transmission.

"There are reasons to believe that ... if you're just out and about walking around, it's probably even much less than that," he said, adding that if transmission is happening outdoors, it's more likely in a crowded places, like a rally, where people are congregating for extended periods.

Jha is one of a growing number of public health experts who see the benefit of easing blanket outdoor face mask requirements. It's a question that infectious disease officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are pondering as well.

But not all experts want to see exposed faces outside anytime soon. The reason is because, as Chicago internist Dr. Jay Bhatt put it, "the risk is not zero."

That may be true, but you know what else fails to drive the risk of COVID-19 infection to zero? Wearing a face covering. Getting vaccinated. Leaving the house. Not leaving the house.

There's always going to be at least a slight risk of infection, no matter how cautious we are. But restrictions are most effective when they focus on the riskiest activities rather than trying to reduce all risk to zero, which is impossible in any case.

It's also counterproductive to force heavy-handed restrictions on people when there's no evidence they are necessary. It miscommunicates the real risk for infection to those who aren't up on the facts, while just annoying those who are.

Case in point: California health officials decided to shut down outdoor playgrounds along with all sorts of other public locations last fall as COVID-19 cases began spiking. But they did so despite the fact that there was no evidence that monkey bars and swing sets are COVID-19 vectors, and people knew it.

The backlash from frustrated parents was so swift and severe (and justified) that the ill-advised action was almost immediately reversed. It makes you wonder how many people decided at that moment that public health officials just didn't know what they were talking about and stopped following any of their advice.

C'mon, it's time to ease up on the face mask rules for outdoors. It's time to give the people who have been faithfully following face masks protocols a low-risk break.

Mariel Garza is a Los Angeles Times editorial writer.

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Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ray Duman, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.