

EDITORIAL

Oregon children
are dying needlessly

A child's unnecessary death is agonizing. Learning the details is painful. But if we don't learn how children in Oregon die needlessly, more will die needlessly.

Oregon's Department of Human Services does a special investigation when it is aware the death of a child could have been the result of abuse or neglect and there was previous contact with the state's child services. They are called Critical Incident Review Team Final Reports. They are public documents, scrubbed of identifying information.

It's hard to know what is the worst thing about reading the reports. That there are so many. That there were often worrying signs that people saw before the child died. That so often the conclusion is that there are no specific recommendations for changes in DHS policy that might have led to a better outcome.

Here are some details of just one. Reviewing how the allegations stacked up and knowing how it ended, it's an evolving nightmare.

In May, an Oregon father came home and found his own 17-year-old child dead and the child's 17-year-old partner also dead. Both died of drug overdose from fentanyl.

Family members knew the children were using drugs, though not how much. The father of one of the children knew his child was using alcohol and marijuana. The father of the other child knew his child was using marijuana. It's not clear if parents knew they were using more dangerous drugs.

Staff at the children's school had been concerned. They had worried the two children had been using illegal drugs, specifically pills. The school has reported the concerns to the parents. The school offered the children help. The children chose not to access it.

Several months earlier, in December, Oregon's Department of Human Services received a report stating that one of these children was using and selling drugs for the child's father. That child had also reportedly used LSD with the other child. A caseworker from DHS made an unscheduled visit to the home. The father was actually on the phone with the police when the caseworker arrived, reporting his home had been burglarized. The father and the two children denied many of the drug allegations. One child did admit using marijuana and using LSD.

The caseworker checked all the rooms of the home. No signs of substance abuse were found. The caseworker determined the allegations of neglect and harm by the father of the home were unfounded.

Before that incident, there were state interactions with the other child's family going back to 2005. They included:

Alleged neglect by the mother in 2005 by supposedly driving under the influence of marijuana and exposing the child to marijuana smoke. The mother denied the allegation. DHS determination at the time: unfounded.

In another incident in 2005, the father was alleged to have put the child behind the car so the mother would not leave. DHS determination at the time: unfounded.

In 2008, the child alleged it had been smacked to the ground by the mother. DHS determination at the time: unfounded.

In 2009, the child stated it had hurt its head when the mother shoved it in a corner. DHS determination at the time: Dismissed because the child had no evidence of injury.

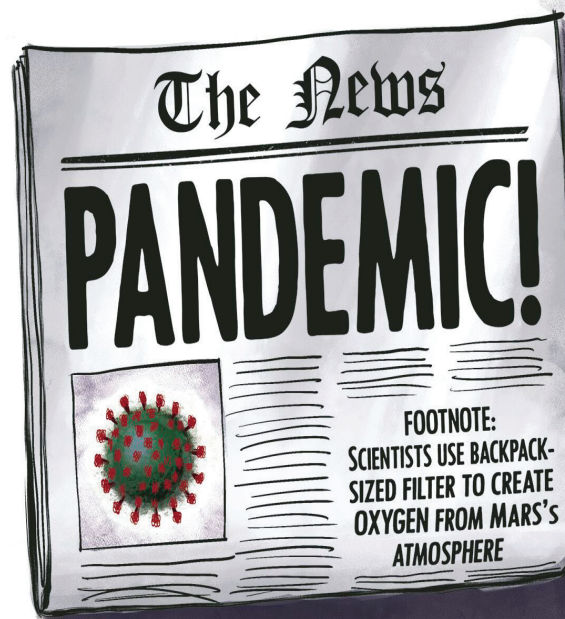
There were two cases in 2013 where neglect by the mother and father was found because of lack of supervision. There was another case in 2013 where the father was found to have admitted to driving the child to school in 2013 under medication that made him drowsy. In 2019, the father was alleged to be supplying a child with marijuana. The report was dismissed at its initial screening because of lack of details, apparently with no effort to investigate further.

What could have been done differently to prevent these two children from dying? The state's report identifies a number of places where the state should have done more. For instance, in 2019 not enough information was gathered to make an adequate determination to dismiss the allegation. And when the children rejected services for substance abuse, not enough extra steps were taken to ensure they did. There are several more.

This tragedy happened despite the fact that Gov. Kate Brown implemented more close oversight of the Department of Human Services. She and the Legislature worked together to provide more caseworkers to ease the burden on overworked and stressed state staff. We will be choosing a new governor in November to lead. They need to be asked how specifically can the state make progress on reducing nightmares like this one. There is no simple answer. But we need our leaders to focus on it.

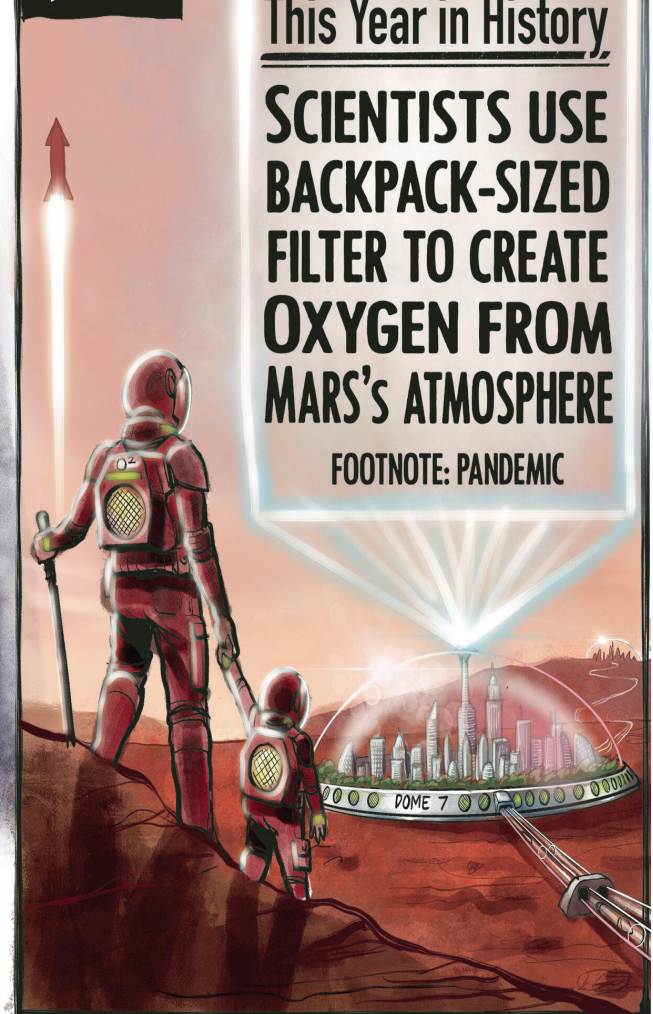
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YOUR VIEWS

Idaho Power acting like a bully in
pursuit of B2H power line

Idaho Power is continuing their bullying of Oregon landowners. The law does not allow a utility to force landowners to enter their property absent a Certificate of Public Convenience which would allow them to have the court condemn the property to build a transmission line. The company cannot get a Certificate of Public Convenience until the Oregon Department of Energy issues a final Site Certificate. This has not occurred and there are multiple contested cases ongoing regarding the

transmission line which need to be resolved prior to issuing a Site Certificate. STOP B2H and multiple private citizens have active contested cases, many of which will likely go to the Oregon Supreme Court for final resolution. The issues are multiple, including a failure to adequately address wildfire risk and invasive weeds, impacts to the Oregon Trail, noise above safe noise standards, impacts to threatened and endangered fish, impacts to wells and springs, and the list goes on and on.

Since day one this out-of-state utility has advertised and told property owners that this transmission line is a "done

deal." There is no point in fighting it. They have misled and misinformed citizens to get them to accommodate their demands. Eastern Oregon is not filled with a bunch of sheep that will just bow down and allow themselves to be run over by this out of state utility. Idaho Power is in it for the profit the utility users will be forced to pay them for the development of this unnecessary transmission line. We are in it to protect our environment and quality of life. They have money, we have heart and the fight continues.

Irene Gilbert
La Grande

OTHER VIEWS

Why schools should stay open
even during omicron surge

By MICHAEL R. STRAIN

Bravo, Bill de Blasio. The New York City mayor announced on Tuesday, Dec. 28 that the city's public schools will stop quarantining entire classrooms when one or more students test positive for COVID. Instead, the city will increase its use of testing to allow asymptomatic students who test negative to stay in school.

As omicron cases surge around the nation, New York's policy bucks what could still turn into a wave of school closures and classroom quarantines. A district in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., decided to go virtual until mid-January in light of an uptick in COVID infections. Some local politicians are suggesting there might be a need for schools to return to virtual learning. As COVID case counts continue to grow, so will pressure on districts across the nation to keep kids at home.

That would be a disaster for children. Even if counts of new omicron cases break pandemic records, students should remain in classrooms if they test negative after an exposure.

In fact, schools should go further. If rapid tests aren't available immediately, then asymptomatic children should remain in school, even if another student in their classroom tests positive. Their symptoms can be more closely monitored, as access to tests becomes available. And kids who test positive should be let back in after they are no longer symptomatic and test negative two days in a row, rather than being required to stay at home for a specified number of days.

After 21 months, remote learning has proved to be a massive failure. Its consequences have been well documented and widely discussed: learning loss, developmental setbacks, mental health issues, food insecurity and even an increase in the severity of child abuse. Some of these problems will affect stu-

dents' lives for decades.

Meanwhile, vaccines are available for older children. Local officials should be able to decide whether to mandate them, free of interference from their state capitol. COVID does not generally present a serious health risk for kids — in fact, preliminary evidence suggests that omicron appears to be causing milder sickness than the delta variant — but parents who are concerned about their children catching COVID are free to keep them at home.

Yes, there are risks. But consider some of the long-term economic consequences of remote learning. Schooling builds skills, which in turn increase wages and earnings. Learning loss will reduce the lifetime earnings of today's remote learners by tens of thousands of dollars.

For some students, the losses will be even greater. During the pandemic there was an increase in the number of high school dropouts and a decrease in the share of high school seniors who went on for postsecondary education.

Students from higher-income families might be able to catch up from nearly two years of intermittent in-person school, but low-income children will find that much more difficult. This will widen educational disparities today and economic disparities in the future.

The future economy will suffer because today's children aren't learning as much as they should. In addition, the current labor shortage will be exacerbated if schools move to remote learning or if entire classrooms continue to be quarantined when just one or two students in the room test positive.

Uncertainty about whether kids will physically be in school means that many parents can only work sporadically. Some have chosen to stay out of the labor force altogether until classrooms are open consistently. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau report that over 5 million people were not working in early

December because they were caring for children who weren't in school or day care.

For parents who want to work, this situation is hurting their career progression and reducing their earnings. Employers, and the overall economy, are missing out on their contributions.

With so many workers on the sidelines, employers are having to raise workers' pay rapidly in order to attract and retain employees, contributing to a steep rise in nominal wage inflation. Average wages are growing at a 5% annual rate. In the leisure and hospitality sector, they are growing at a 12% annual rate.

These costs are being passed along to consumers. Last month, consumer prices rose faster than at any time in the past four decades. This is eroding the purchasing power of nominal wage gains and causing substantial stress for families. It also risks causing a broader economic slowdown, or possibly a recession.

It is no longer the spring of 2020. At this point, developing a severe case of the virus is essentially a choice because COVID vaccines are widely available and very effective. Therapeutics are increasingly available as well, further reducing the risk of severe disease. Perhaps as a result, Americans are learning to live with the virus, traveling in large numbers for the holidays and even packing themselves into movie theaters to see the latest "Spider-Man" film.

If theaters remain open in the face of surging omicron cases, so should classrooms. At this point in the pandemic, anything other than in-person learning for children would be indefensible.

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