

Foster system crisis consultants close to completing \$1 million contract

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

By Christmas, crisis consultants brought on to improve Oregon's struggling foster care system are expected to wrap up their \$1 million contract.

In April, Gov. Kate Brown asked a crew of consultants from the firm Alvarez and Marsal — perhaps best known for taking over Lehman Brothers after the Wall Street firm filed for bankruptcy — to look under the hood at the Oregon Department of Human Services.

They were tasked with kick-starting solutions to deep-seated problems at the agency's Child Welfare division.

About 7,000 Oregon kids are in foster care on any given day, and over the past several years, a bright spotlight has been on the agency for treatment of children in its care.

DHS has been the subject of multiple internal and external reviews that have laid out what the agency needed to change to keep kids safe.

Brown was adamant that she didn't want more recommendations. Instead, she wanted action on recommendations already made, some repeatedly over recent years.

For instance, multiple audits and reviews pointed to the agency's workload problem.

Experts have long said that DHS caseworkers who have front line duty for the well being of foster kids have

too many to look after and were getting overwhelmed and burned out. About a third of workers had less than a year and a half of experience, according to a 2018 state audit.

In a meeting with lawmakers last week in her office at the Capitol, Brown said the consultants had made "really steady progress."

She pointed to their work on the agency's Critical Incident Review teams, which investigate deaths of kids who have interacted with the child welfare system, and to their efforts to rapidly hire more caseworkers and reduce the number of Oregon children shuttled out of state for care.

Brown also said the agency is improving its handling of requests for public records and in communicating with reporters and the public.

Brown appeared especially happy with efforts to hire more workers. Audits and reports for years have highlighted the damaging impact of high workloads on kids in the child welfare system.

The agency received thousands of applications to fill new jobs, Brown said.

"All I know is it was extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it," Brown said. "We have now made ... conditional offers to over 345 applicants and they're in the process of getting trained. So I'm really, really pleased."

Wanda Seiler of Alvarez and Marsal told legislators that the firm did a lot of work smoothing out the inter-

nal workings of the agency that wouldn't be immediately apparent. One example: Making it easier for kids in foster care to get medical care.

Seiler reviewed a host of changes consultants have already made, like creating new training for certain jobs and streamlining the agency's hiring process.

State Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, D-Portland, expressed concerns that high caseloads could continue to cause workers to leave.

"I just want to again, reiterate that as great as the ... surge is, and the extra training and hiring for other positions to support that, we would still risk hemorrhaging if the caseload is so great," said Keny-Guyer.

There was also some discussion about a year-long project to centralize the state's abuse reporting hotline. That effort has encountered long wait times for callers and inexperienced staff.

The change also seems to have driven up the number of assessments of abuse reports. After the new central hotline was put into place, assessments by Child Protective Services are up by about 40 percent, according to Oregon DHS.

The consultants have also worked on giving parents more help so children could stay in their homes.

"The big story here really is the need for services to support families to stay together," Seiler said.

Much of that progress will take time, Seiler said.

Twenty-one arrested after hours-long sit-in of Gov. Kate Brown's office

By Sam Stites
Oregon Capital Bureau

State police ended a protest and occupation of Gov. Kate Brown's office Thursday night by arresting 21 people for criminal trespass.

They were the remaining demonstrators who filled the governor's ceremonial office Thursday afternoon to show their opposition to the liquefied natural gas project in Coos Bay.

The protest started with hundreds on the Capitol steps before moving inside to the rotunda midday and then to Brown's office, on the second floor.

Brown wasn't in the office at the time but did talk to protesters by phone. Later in the evening, she returned and talked with those occupying her office.

Thomas Joseph, a leader of the sit-in, said that around 9:30 p.m., the Oregon State Police ordered about 65 protesters to disperse. The state police said in a press release Friday that the order was given by Superintendent Travis Hampton.

At that time many of those remaining packed up and left the Capitol, but 21 individuals stayed and were arrested by state troopers.

The target of the protesters is a project called Jordan Cove, which includes plans for a gas pipeline running across 229 miles of Oregon landscape, from the border town of Malin east of Klamath Falls to Coos Bay.



Oregon Capital Bureau/Jake Thomas

Demonstrators protesting the proposed liquefied natural gas facility at Jordan Cove staged a sit-in Thursday at Gov. Kate Brown's ceremonial office in the Capitol in Salem.

Proponents say the project would be an economic boon for Coos County while environmentalists say the risks to Oregon's environment are significant.

According to a press release from Southern Oregon Rising Tide, one of those arrested was 72-year-old Sandy Lyons, a landowner in Days Creek who would be impacted by the pipeline.

Lyons said Thursday that her family has lived and worked on their Douglas County ranch for nearly 30 years and have been fighting the pipeline for the past 15.

"I am here today because we have tried every possible way to be heard and want somehow to gain the governor's attention to how wrong this is, and the negative ways in which it will permanently scar us and our land," Lyons said.

Also arrested were Guy Berliner, 49, Shawn Creeden, 38, Simone Crowe, 31, Kelly

Campbell, 47, Diana Rempe, 53, and Dineen Orourke, 24, all of Portland; Eric Howanietz, 38, Tyee Williams, 22, and Samuel Yergler, 34, all of Eugene; Rianna Koppel, 31, and Kayla Starr, 78, of Talent; Derek De Forest Pyle, 28, of Ashland; Domyo Burk, 48, of Beaverton; Jonathan Major, 42, of Jacksonville; Sofia Jokela, 28, and Henry Jokela, 25, of Milwaukie; Stephen Dear, 55, of Elmira; Emma Rohwer, 40, of Klamath Falls; Sally Malitz, 72, of Corvallis; and May Wallace, 69, of California.

The state police said they were each accused of second-degree criminal trespassing and booked at the Marion County Jail. The crime is punishable by up to 30 days in jail and a fine of up to \$1,250.

The jail's online inmate roster showed four of those arrested — Lyons, Koppel, Creeden and Pyle — remained lodged as of Friday morning.

Proposal to limit money in Oregon politics unveiled

By Jake Thomas
Oregon Capital Bureau

Legislators last week considered a plan intended to impose greater controls on Oregon's increasingly expensive political campaigns and reduce the influence of money on state politics.

"There is at minimum the perception of undue influence of money in politics," said state Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, chair of interim committee on

campaign finance, on Nov. 19.

The committee is crafting campaign finance reforms to be considered in the 2020 Legislature.

Oregon is one of five states with no limits on campaign contributions, and the proposal would establish regulations that have eluded reformers. During a committee hearing, legislators from both major parties expressed reservations about the proposal while campaign

finance reform advocates called on lawmakers to go further.

Under the proposal, individuals would be limited to \$750 in contributions to any legislative candidate and \$2,000 for those seeking statewide office. The limits would apply separately to primary and general election campaigns.

Individual contributions to state party committees and legislative caucus committees would be capped at \$2,000 annually.

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