

DHS stats missing key piece

Every month since early in 2018, the Oregon Department of Human Services has been publishing reports for Gov. Kate Brown showing its progress to rebuild and improve the state's foster care system.

The monthly reports have evolved. Some statistics that DHS reported in the past to the governor are no longer being reported to her. We are not sure that's an improvement.

Gov. Kate Brown requested the monthly reports after a devastating state audit in January 2018. The audit showed that the state's child welfare system was so disorganized and inconsistent it was putting the children it served at high risk. The audit said chronic understaffing of caseworkers and overwhelming workloads were having a terrible impact on the state's ability to care for some of its more vulnerable children. DHS also lacked data to track its performance.

DHS, Gov. Brown and legislators have worked together and made many improvements since then. Most notable perhaps is more caseworkers have been hired. And Gov. Brown established a child welfare oversight board in April 2019 to more closely monitor progress.

There used to be a link to that audit on the DHS website. If it's there still, we can't find it. That's a shame. It's a piece of history of Oregon's DHS that should never be forgotten. The audit can be found on the secretary of state's website.

What's in the monthly reports to the governor has changed. They are much easier to read now. They are more colorful. There are far fewer numbers. Some change is to be expected — even necessary — as priorities and problems evolve and metrics are reexamined.

A metric we noticed that is gone: repeat abuse. It was a metric established to mea-

sure how often children who are mistreated are mistreated again.

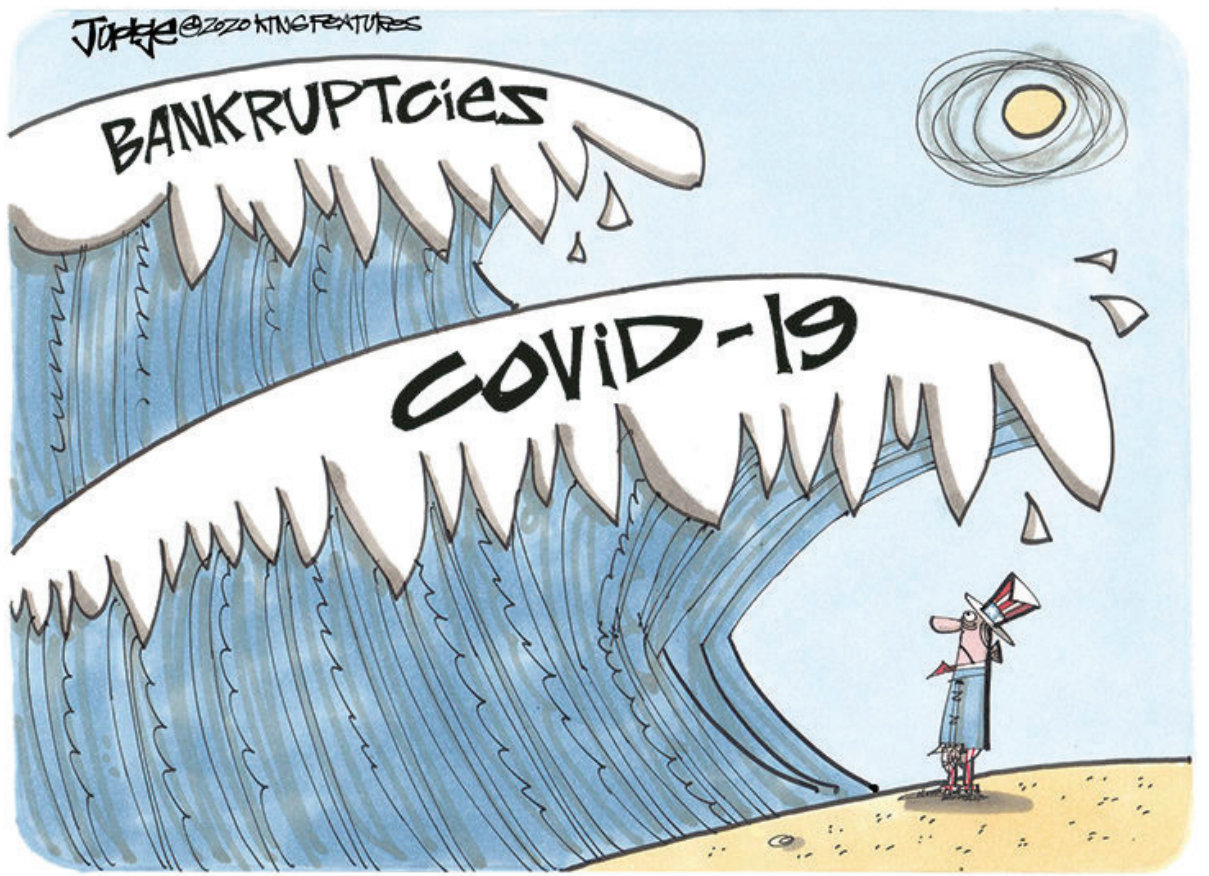
Specifically the definition is "of all children who were victims of a substantiated or indicated report of maltreatment during a 12-month target period, what percent were the victims of another substantiated or indicated maltreatment allegation within 12 months." The state's goal was a rate of less than or equal to 9.1%, and it wanted to see the rate decline. The state's numbers were 9.6% in the second quarter of 2017, 10.3% in the third quarter of 2017 and 10.9% in the fourth quarter of 2017, according to the March 2018 monthly report to the governor. In March 2020 it was 11.4%.

If you look at the more recent reports to the governor, that repeat abuse metric is missing. The state still tracks it. It just doesn't share it any more in reports to the governor.

We wanted to know why. DHS's short answer is: It doesn't really move. It stays pretty much the same. So DHS told us it felt like it "did not provide a valuable update on what happened on a monthly basis."

We disagree. It represents children that are harmed again when the state knew they had been harmed before. For March 2020, the total number of child victims in Oregon was 12,538. Of those, 11,110 were not harmed again or did not have a report of harm within a year. But 1,428 had been harmed again.

The repeat abuse statistic may not move much, despite the improvements DHS is making, but it should be reported to the governor. It's a sad and terrible number. One of the primary purposes of Oregon's child welfare effort is to protect children from future harm if they have already experienced maltreatment. We need to be reminded of the failures as well as the progress.



THE SECOND WAVE APPEARS

FARMER'S FATE

Kids, love and Oreos

The "F" word makes many people feel faint — but it's what gives my life strength. It's how I identify. Actually it's a combination of three "F" words that really make up the core of who I am and what I love: family, farming and faith.

My family, like many in agriculture, I imagine, are a funny little band of characters going through life sharing milk and the common cold, vying to drive the nicest tractor, hiding the chocolate from each other, borrowing clothes and machinery, short-sheeting the beds, putting toothpaste inside Oreo cookies, laughing, loving, fighting, teasing and sharing the common threads that bind us together — farming and family.

Farming was never a question: long hours, little sleep, tight budgets — it was a lifestyle I knew and loved. But starting our own family seemed to bring many, many hours of "what ifs" and uncertainty. It seemed like a much bigger commitment than signing over everything you had to the bank for the opportunity to work like a dog in hopes that the bank would let you do it all over the next year. But the moment we saw each of those little baby boys, we wished we would have had them sooner. It was love at first sight — we know it was love because Dr. Seuss said you know you're in love when you can't sleep. I think he followed it up with something like "because reality is better than your dreams." But he could have stopped with sleep — we certainly didn't the first few months. But every sleep-deprived moment was worth it, for family is the foundation of everything. We're like four volumes of the same book — each recording different



Brianna Walker

moments, different perspectives, different wants and goals. But while our chapters are different, they are bound by the same fabric and thread.

One of my favorite results

of having kids running (and often shouting) around the house and underfoot is the inability to be cross all day. One can start out the day in a bad mood, but it is nearly impossible to keep that mood — they are far too entertaining.

The other morning I came in and grabbed the fresh load of linens out of the dryer. I tossed the John Deere sheet set to my oldest son, saying, "Quick, put these on your bed. Then we need to go swath." Later that night when we came in, tired from a long day, my son asked my help making his bed.

"I thought you made it this morning?" I asked. He shook his head with a smirk, "You said put the sheets 'on' the bed, not make it." He was right. That was exactly what I had said. We both knew what I had meant — but his logic was impeccable.

Only days after the sheet incident, my 3-year-old reinforced what most seasoned parents already know — that word specificity is paramount. I was in the bathroom when he first toddled out of bed and knocked on the door of our only bathroom, our other bathroom currently under construction.

"Can you just go outside?" I asked (one of the perks of living in the country).

"Where?" he asked. "It's cold outside."

"RICH OR POOR, WE WILL KEEP TOGETHER AND BE HAPPY IN ONE ANOTHER."

—Louisa May Alcott, "Little Women," 1868

"Just go out the door," I answered, "on the porch."

Five minutes later when my husband came in for breakfast, I realized just what a poor word choice that was — but how can one have a bad day after that? It's those crazy moments in life that change your mood, that make you smile — that create happiness. Like when my 3-year-old helped put away the groceries, taking great pride in opening the package of plastic utensils meant for a picnic, putting them in the silverware drawer and throwing away the box. Or when you give your kids each a quarter of a breakfast omelet, but your youngest wants a bigger piece because he has a bigger mouth. Or when he licks the frosting out of the Oreo and then happily announces he saved the cookie for you. (That may be where the toothpaste-filled Oreos came in — not that I am admitting to it.)

Those moments are love. Reality really is better than dreams — even though I have no difficulty falling asleep now. It's really hard to beat the life of a farming family. And as we all head out to the field, in our different pieces of hay equipment, I can't help smiling to myself — the family that bales together, prevails together.

Brianna Walker occasionally writes about the Farmer's Fate for the Blue Mountain Eagle.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Government honesty requires accurate and timely reporting

To the Editor:

I am certainly thankful for the efforts local people and the county government have made to help avoid a COVID-19 outbreak in Grant County and to prepare for it when we get more cases.

I have watched Grant County Court meetings online and have been reading minutes and articles over the past months. I join many people in being dismayed at the lack of reporting and transparency, the high overrun in approved

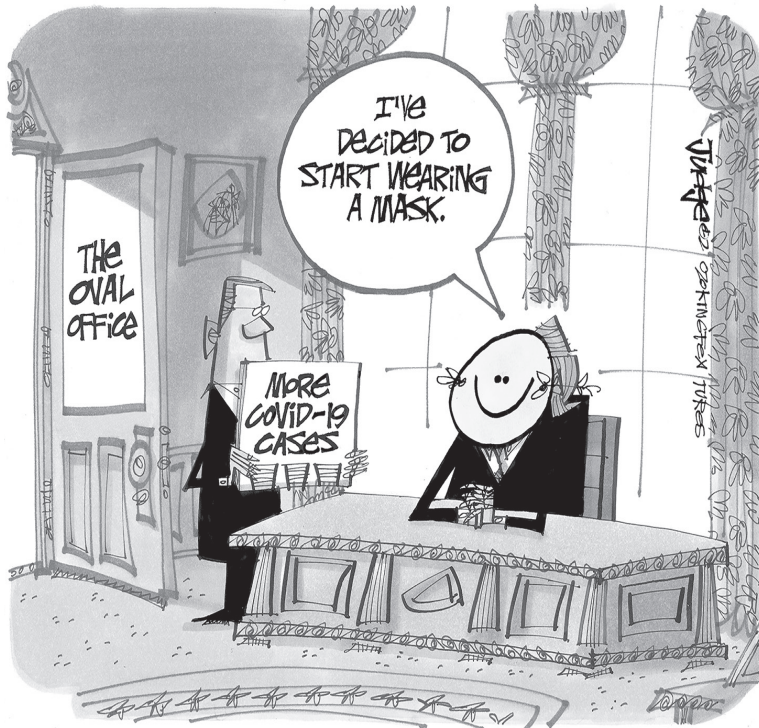
expenditures and how some of the funds were spent. I remain unclear as to why a sheriff's deputy was appointed to run the EOC and why he quit.

One of the most interesting things I have noted were the hours said to have been spent on COVID-19-related work by County Commissioners Jim Hamsher and Sam Palmer. Included in the county court minutes from June 10 was a letter from Seth Klingbeil, EOC cybersecurity officer. It stated that Jim and Sam had each worked 1,000 hours on COVID-19 tasks. Thinking this seemed quite high, I started with the date they were appointed (about March 10), did some simple calculations and found that each of them must have worked

11 hours a day, seven days a week for that three months! Also, if Jim and Sam took Sundays off, that meant they worked 13 hours a day, six days a week — on COVID-19 only, let alone their county court responsibilities. I would think the public would be as amazed as I am!

Clearly, we all should and do appreciate the work Jim and Sam and many others did and continue to do. But what I look for from government is honesty, that is: accurate and timely reporting — in hours, activities, costs, etc. Otherwise, how am I going to believe anything that is reported from our county government? Please respect the citizens.

Victoria Thompson
Mt. Vernon



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