'Crisis' at St. Charles Health

By SUZANNE ROIG The Bulletin

BEND - Nurses and medical professionals are concerned that St. Charles Health System is "inept and chaotic," following the discovery it filed and pulled a statement to state health officials that it was experiencing a staffing crisis.

The health system notified the Oregon Health Authority on July 15 that it had an emergency due to its current staffing shortage, according to documents provided by the health authority. The emergency declaration, called "crisis standard of care," has not been used by any Oregon hospital during the pandemic, according to state health officials.

Hospitals can issue crisis standards of care when critical care resources are severely limited, the number of patients presenting for critical care exceeds capacity, and there is no option to transfer patients to another facility, according to state health guidelines.

Officials at St. Charles were told their emergency didn't meet those state guidelines, but if staffing models were being altered and it was delaying nonurgent care, the public needed to be notified, according to emails from the hospital to state health officials.

The health system, at no time, ever turned away patients or operated under this crisis standard of care, said Lisa Goodman, St. Charles Health System spokeswoman.

"The emails between St.



Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin file

An entrance to St. Charles Bend, seen in September 2020.

Charles executives and the Oregon Health Authority about the staffing crisis at all four St Charles facilities reads exactly as we would expect: inept and chaotic," said Scott Palmer, Oregon Nurses Association director of communications. "Our hospital systems are overtaxed, overburdened. They're really struggling.'

At an emergency staffing meeting on Wednesday, nurses told the health system that declaring a staffing emergency puts more work on the staff at a time when morale is at its lowest, said Joel Hernandez, a St. Charles Bend registered nurse and Oregon Nurses Association vice president.

He also feared patient safety could be at risk.

"We have a feeling that no one knows what they're doing," Hernandez said. "As someone who has worked in health care for 15 years, I've never seen morale this low."

Schedules are changed, workloads are higher than the accepted standard of care, particularly for nurses working the night shift, and often nurses are unable to take their lunch breaks without doubling the workload of another nurse, Hernandez said.

notification The crisis comes on the heels of layoffs for two key executives Dr. Jeff Absalon and Rod Marchiando. Their positions will be eliminated Aug. 1. On July 12, the hospital system announced CEO Joe Sluka was stepping down and also reported \$40 million in operational losses.

And in May, the health system laid off 105 nonmedical workers and eliminated 76 vacant positions to staunch the growing financial losses.

"St. Charles has a staffing problem," said Palmer, of the nurses association. "From our perspective, there's some deeply suspicious behavior going on. It's absolutely concerning. There's no doubt that every single nurse and health care worker is frustrated and angry and overworked.

In the future, the hospital plans to notify the public if it needs to limit care or amend staffing requirements, Good-

"We did prepare a public notice that would have alerted the public to the fact that our ability to provide health care services was limited as the result of our need to alter our nurse staffing plans," Goodman said in an email. "We had intended to post that language to our website and at our hospital entrances."

The staffing challenges at the health system are not new, Goodman said. The system is so stressed, that chief nurse executives are being pressed into front-line caregiving, she said. Currently the health system has a 21% vacancy rate for inpatient nurses and a 28% vacancy rate for certified nursing assistants, Goodman said.

Hospitals statewide have been struggling with issues, but the pandemic made it worse, according to state health officials. Some of the issues include: Patients delaying care because of COVID-19, a shortage of long-term care beds making it difficult for hospitals to discharge patients in a timely fashion, and 28 months of a pandemic.

"It is widely known that St. Charles Health System is struggling mightily right now with many serious issues," said former board member Knute Buehler, who was also a state representative for Bend. "To maintain community confidence it is crucial for them to be transparent with regards to the specific challenges no matter if legally required

Feds earmark \$1.7M for Morrow water woes

East Oregonian

WASHINGTON — Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley announced Friday, July 29, they secured \$1.7 million for Morrow County to address drinking water contamination in Boardman.

The money comes from the fiscal year 2023 Senate appropriations bill. Merkley, as chair of the Senate Interior Appropriations subcommittee, along with Wyden, identified the funding for this critical community-initiated project that will help residents of Morrow and Umatilla counties have greater access to clean drinking water.

Morrow County in a statement reported the funds will pay for the testing of wells and to study longer-term solutions and options for rural residents who rely on individual wells for their drinking water.

"This federal funding will help Morrow County move beyond the short-term nitrate emergency and help us work towards longer term solutions," Morrow County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said in a press release. "The senators' support during the nitrate emergency has been so valuable. This new source of significant funding will allow Morrow County to develop a standardized data and testing program to monitor rural wells and also study long term solutions to clean drinking water for rural residents."

She also said she appreciated the collaboration with the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners. She and Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran worked with staff from both counties to make the request for federal dollars.

Morrow County Commission Chair Jim Doherty in the press release called the funding "welcomed support."

Doherty and staff have spent many hours the past few months directly involved in the emergency efforts to test water in households and provide them with clean drinking water. However, he said, "Morrow County will continue to vigilantly push the state of Oregon for longterm, permanent support to remedy the negative health effects of high nitrate levels in rural domestic wells."

Morrow County Board of Commissioners on June 9 declared an emergency over the contamination. The move came in the wake of the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality in January

issuing a \$1.3 million fine against the Port of Morrow in Boardman for years of violating its wastewater permit and allowing hundreds of tons of excess nitrogen onto area farmlands above the already contaminated basin. The DEQ on June 17 increased that fine to \$2.1 million.

"Since the emergency declaration, we are finally receiving attention and resources from state agencies," according to Doherty. "The Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area has been in place for almost 40 years and not until the declaration have we had support from the Oregon Health Authority and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality." Morrow and Umatilla

County have participated in the LUBGWMA volunteer committee since 1990 when the state declared the area due to high levels of nitrates. The LUBGWMA committee is in the process of implementing the Second Action Plan to reduce nitrate contamination from a number of sources, septic systems, fertilizer, land application of wastewater, washout from the Umatilla Army Depot and feedlots, according to the press release. Funding for the LUBGWMA has been almost nonexistent. primarily in the form of a part-time employee to test a small sample of wells.

In addition to the LUB-GWMA committee, Umatilla and Morrow counties, together with help from stakeholders, were able to secure direct legislative funding to more scientifically study the source of nitrate contamination, the press release stated. Known as the LUBGWMA Subcommittee, the bi-county effort soon will have an Oregon State University scientist working on a study of

historical data. Doherty also credited Lindsay for advocating for the research and her involvement in the subcommittee efforts.

"We are getting closer to where we need to be to address the short-term and long-term groundwater problems," he stated. "Our immediate priority is public health and ensuring rural residents have clean, safe, potable water. We remain vigilant however, in our commitment to study the sources of pollution and to seek long term remedies. We sincerely appreciate the support of Sen. Wyden and Sen. Merkley and their staff."

Oregon meat inspection plan OK'd

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN

Capital Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Thursday, July 28, approved a regulatory plan that allows Oregon to revive its state meat inspection

The goal is to expand opportunities for small-scale processors who can't sell commercially because the meat they process is not federally inspected. Oregon has just 13 USDA-inspected facilities statewide; the new program will allow the state to also do inspections, though state-inspected meat can only be sold within Oregon.

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service has finalized a cooperative agreement with Oregon Department of Agriculture, giving ODA authority to inspect meat produced for shipment within the state

Lauren Henderson, ODA's deputy director, has been talking for decades about re-establishing the state inspection program to increase Oregon's slaughter and processing capacity. ODA's previous state inspection program ended in 1971 due to budget cuts.

When the pandemic hit and producers struggled to move meat due to a shortage of inspection services, officials started talking more seriously about re-instituting state inspections.

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In 2020, Oregon legislators passed a bill approving the state meat inspection program, and later approved \$2 million in grants to help processors get started. Thursday's approval from USDA was the final puzzle

"I am so proud of our state, our partners and the many ODA staff that helped make Oregon's State Meat Inspection Program a reality," ODA director Alexis Taylor said in a statement.

USDA's deputy undersecretary Sandra Eskin said she anticipates the program will strengthen the food system and help prevent supply chain bottlenecks.

"This program is especially helpful to small meat and poultry processors in building their local and state marketplaces," said

Oregon is now among 28 states with meat inspection programs.

Though Thursday's move was applauded by many, some meat experts are skeptical the program is all it is chalked up to be.

At the Oregon Cattlemen's Association convention last November, some ranchers and meat processors expressed concern that the program may not be the best use of taxpayer dollars. Outfitting a plant to meet inspection requirements is no small feat, they said, and the \$2 million is just a drop in the

Henderson, of ODA, told cattlemen at the event that he fully anticipates going back before the Legislature in the future to secure more funding for the program long-term.

To meet the new state standards, processors will have to meet requirements "at least equal to those imposed under the Federal Meat Inspection Act," according to USDA.

Some experts say that if a processor is going to shoulder the effort and expense to meet federal standards anyway — including installing fully washable walls, temperature controls and wastewater disposal systems — why wouldn't it just become a USDA-inspected plant that can sell meat nationally rather than a state-inspected plant that can only sell within Oregon?

If a place is going to go through the trouble of coming under inspection, most of them will just go USDA-inspected, or they already are USDA-inspected, said Rebecca Thistlethwaite, director of Oregon State University's Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network.

Thistlethwaite said she doesn't expect many processors to utilize the state program. Many officials, however, remain optimistic.

"This USDA approval will open up more processing options for our state's hard-working agricultural producers," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.



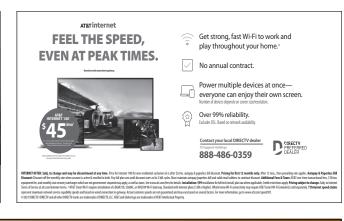
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