

SEASIDE HIGH SCHOOL

Three students, three staff test positive for virus

Seaside Signal

Three students and three staff members/volunteers have tested positive for the coronavirus at Seaside High School, the state disclosed.

The most recent onset of virus cases were on March 25, according to a weekly report of outbreaks released by the Oregon Health Authority on Wednesday.

Two positive cases tied to students were also reported at Astoria High School dating to March 20.

Seaside Superintendent Susan Penrod said there have been no hospitalizations among students or staff. All staff and families have been notified.

"We continue to diligently follow all the cleaning and safety requirements in the Ready Schools, Safe Learners

document, as well as the communicable disease plan that is posted on our website," Penrod said. "This plan is a collaborative effort developed by all the school nurses in our county."

In March, Seaside High School Principal Jeff Roberts disclosed two confirmed virus cases among student-athletes, resulting in a canceled game for the Seaside football team against Banks.



Seaside School District

At Columbia Memorial Hospital, social workers have a role in care

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Recognizing a gap in mental health treatment on the North Coast, Columbia Memorial Hospital has placed social workers throughout its network, including the emergency department, to help patients in crisis.

The Astoria hospital, like Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, law enforcement and social services agencies, has seen an increase in people struggling with mental health. The lack of mental health treatment in the region has been at issue for decades, but has become more pronounced since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Columbia Memorial and Providence Seaside Hospital, the largest health care providers on the North Coast, are not designed to treat people with significant mental health or drug and alcohol abuse problems. But since many people in crisis end up in emergency rooms, the hospitals are on the front lines and are under greater pressure to intervene.

"We can't just separate behavioral and physical health out anymore. They are so intertwined and they impact each other so greatly," said Allison Whisenhunt, a clinical social worker who serves as Columbia Memorial's director of behavioral health, a new position. The hospital also hopes to recruit a psychiatric nurse practitioner.

"We partner really closely with Clatsop Behavioral Health on a lot of cases. And what we're trying to do really is fill any gaps that exist in the community," she said. "So it's not about competing with anybody else who's doing services. It's really filling the gaps where people aren't able to access services."

"So, for instance, the folks who don't have the kinds of insurance that Clatsop Behavioral Health accepts — trying to help make sure they still have access to behavioral health supports as well — has really been the focus."

'There's always a lot of scrutiny'

Social workers support the emergency department at Columbia Memorial seven days a week, 10 hours a day, with a focus on behavioral health.

If there is a behavioral health crisis off hours then Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare — Clatsop County's mental health provider — comes in and helps conduct a behavioral health assessment. Every morning, social workers follow up on messages from the emergency department overnight.

Sometimes, people in crisis are ready to be connected to treatment and social services, Whisenhunt said, and other times social workers are trying to work proactively to discourage repeated visits to the emergency room. "I think that's one of the beauties of us having an ED social worker program is it really helped support Clatsop Behavioral Health staying outside the hospital walls to help keep peo-



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Social workers help in the emergency department at Columbia Memorial Hospital.

'I'M SO PROUD OF CMH FOR DOING THIS. I THINK THAT FOR MANY YEARS THE COMMUNITY HAS RELIED ON CLATSOP BEHAVIORAL HEALTH TO DO IT ALL, AND NOBODY CAN DO IT ALL!'

Allison Whisenhunt, a clinical social worker who serves as Columbia Memorial's director of behavioral health

ple from ending up in the ED unnecessarily," she said. "And I know that there's been probably plenty of people they have been able to deflect from coming to the ER because the ER is not a place you want to be. It's really one of the least therapeutic places you can be."

Social workers try to find the least restrictive option for patients. If they cannot find an outpatient program, they look toward inpatient psychiatric hospitalization.

The bar for admission to a psychiatric hospital is lower than the legal threshold for civil commitment. To commit someone in Oregon, a court must find they have a mental disorder that poses a danger to themselves or others or they are unable to provide for basic personal needs like health and safety. Whisenhunt said many people in crisis do not meet the criteria for civil commitment, so they have to voluntarily accept treatment.

"And I know there's always a lot of scrutiny," she said. "Why did they release them? And why aren't they helping them? And the truth of the matter is that we do everything we can to help folks. And there are times where our hands are just tied by the way laws are written."

Another barrier is the lack of slots available for psychiatric care across Oregon.

"What we like to do is try to get them to that higher level of care as quickly as

we possibly can," Whisenhunt said. "That has proven increasingly difficult lately. I am sure COVID has contributed to that, but we've always had a psychiatric bed shortage in the state, as we do in many states."

"But it has gotten to a point where it feels like really critical. So (we're) holding patients in the emergency room for several days sometimes, which again, we really don't want to do."

Columbia Memorial does not have a secure room in the emergency department, so they make rooms as safe as possible for people in crisis. Oftentimes, a staffer watches a patient around the clock to help ensure they do not harm themselves.

Judy Geiger, Columbia Memorial's vice president of patient care services, said the hospital does not have any immediate plans for a secure room, but it has started discussing the idea.

"We'll look at all our options on that as the situation stays the same or gets continually more challenging getting patients where they need to go," she said.

The crisis respite center in Warrenton was initially supposed to have four secure beds after it opened in 2016, but Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, which operates the respite center, did not fulfill the promise. For people in severe crisis, that often means they are held at hospital emergency rooms or the county jail.

'Nobody can do it all'

In addition to the emergency department, Columbia Memorial has integrated social workers in other clinics and departments throughout its system, including pediatrics, specialty clinics and maternal and child health.

With the pandemic, many adults and children have needed more support.

"I've been in social work 16 years now, and I have never seen people struggle the way they are struggling over this past year," Whisenhunt said. "People who have developed substance use disorder that didn't have it. People who have relapsed. People who have had incredible exacerbations of depression and anxiety. People who said, 'I've never felt this way before and I just don't know what else to do.'"

"So that's largely, I think, what the social workers in the clinics are able to do to really help support people and finding new ways to try to deal with what they're feeling and experiencing."

"I'm so proud of CMH for doing this. I think that for many years the community has relied on Clatsop Behavioral Health to do it all, and nobody can do it all. And they've got funding specific to certain populations, and that's really where their focus needs to be. And so for us to say, 'OK, well, let us help with these other folks that really are struggling. And the ones that are under your charge, let us help coordinate with you to help get them the care,' — it's been really huge."

"Because, otherwise, to tell someone, 'Well, sorry, they don't take your insurance. You'll have to go to Portland or pay out of pocket' — for somebody who is already really struggling emotionally, that sometimes tips them over the edge. So we're really just trying to just be a resource for the community in this way, too."



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

Hug Point is a popular location on the North Coast.

Parks on the North Coast prepare for busy summer

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

Expecting another busy summer despite coronavirus pandemic concerns, the state has installed permanent "no parking" signs along U.S. Highway 101 ahead of popular state park sites on the North Coast.

Parking lots at Hug Point, Arcadia Beach and Oswald West State Park filled up quickly on nice days last summer. People then made use of highway shoulders. The state tried to curb illegal parking using concrete barriers and warning tape along the highway with mixed results. State parks, facing budget shortfalls and reduced staff, struggled to keep up with all the garbage left behind.

As more people begin to receive vaccinations — and after a year of shutdowns and restrictions — tourism experts and local promoters have predicted a pent-up demand for coastal experiences and travel.

But state parks funding, which draws from lottery dollars, not taxes, took a major hit last year as restaurants and other lottery venues closed or operated in a limited fashion.

This shortfall and other consequences tied to the pandemic disrupted the department's major repair schedule, "which puts us at risk for problems with water, sewer and power systems as they come under pressure this summer," said Chris Havel, a spokesman for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

"Our concern remains one of capacity: it wears down facilities, overtaxes restrooms and trash, and can make it harder to protect health," he said. "All people need to remem-

ber we're still working our way through a health emergency, and do what they know they need to."

This means people should still be limiting travel to close to home, plan to bring their own cleaning supplies and wear face masks when it isn't possible to maintain recommended social distances, Havel said.

The changes to traffic management ahead of popular parks this year could include the installation of live webcams at some locations so people can see which areas are full before they travel, according to Havel.

These measures are likely permanent.

This spring, some state park facilities are still closed and group daytime and camping sites are reopening slowly. Permits to use the ocean shore for group events will not be available until July.

When the state has reopened parks and trails on the coast this year, it has done so quietly. A rerouted and repaired connector trail between Ecola Point and Indian Beach opened without much fanfare this winter, while Saddle Mountain reopened after a long closure in time for spring break without any big announcement.

That, said Ben Cox, manager of the state's Nehalem Bay Management Unit, which includes a number of highly popular camping and recreation sites, was "a bit on purpose."

On poor weather days this spring, traffic has been predictably low at coastal state parks, he said.

But, he said, "on the sunny days it was chaos. Overflowing parking lots, overflowing trash cans and people everywhere."

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