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Ever since the Salem City Council rescinded a camping ban in mid-March to help reduce unsheltered people's exposure to COVID-19, a homeless camp has stretched along the river bank at Wallace Marine Park in West Salem. STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

OSHA enforces Oregon's mask rules

Agency investigates complaints about workplace violations

Claire Withycombe
 Salem Statesman Journal
 USA TODAY NETWORK

Now that Oregonians are required to wear masks in indoor public spaces to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the state's workplace safety agency is preparing to handle enforcement. Gov. Kate Brown ordered people to wear face coverings as COVID-19 cases continue to rise sharply in Oregon and elsewhere. She's warned that tighter restrictions on businesses could return if Oregonians don't take the mask requirement to heart.

Oregon Occupational Safety and Health, commonly called OSHA, is already busy investigating thousands of COVID-related complaints at Oregon workplaces.

Since early March, Oregonians have filed roughly 5,500 workplace complaints related to the pandemic. They have reported a variety of concerns, including worries about a lack of space between people and lack of protective gear like gloves.

OSHA officials had by early June already received some complaints about face coverings, including reports of employees not wearing face coverings at a furniture store and at a restaurant, according to spokesman Aaron Corvin.

Corvin said the agency is expecting more complaints to come in now because of Brown's latest order.

The volume of complaints has far outpaced the agency's typical workload. Generally, the agency gets about 2,000 complaints total in a year, said spokesman Aaron Corvin. In addition to the coronavirus complaints, the agency has also received about 1,000 non-coronavirus complaints this year.

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"If we all wear face coverings, practice six feet of physical distancing in public, wash our hands regularly, and stay home when we are sick, then we can avoid the worst-case scenarios that are now playing out in other states," Gov. Kate Brown said.

BETH NAKAMURA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

An opportunity for homeless advocates

Community support agencies have helped limit the pandemic's effect on Salem's homeless population – but the future is uncertain

Connor Radnovich Salem Statesman Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

At 79 and with serious health concerns — including COPD and a smoking habit — Jaeson Small is a textbook case of someone particularly at risk from COVID-19.

He also became homeless after moving to Oregon in mid-February with his daughter and her wife.

These hardships qualified them to receive temporary shelter support from ARCHES, enough stability for them to find their own apartment.

Inside Small is one of a number of success stories and positive signals to emerge from the pandemic for ARCHES and other community support agencies in the Salem area. But as coronavirus cases spike across Oregon, uncertainty remains about what the long-term solutions are for keeping Salem's homeless population safe.

"Right now we're sitting on the edge," Small said.

The victims of a renting scam, Small, his daughter Krystal Burnett and her wife Samantha Burnett resorted to living in-and-out of motel rooms and their 2002 Chevrolet Trailblazer for a month with a cat and two dogs.

They looked for work and turned to family for financial support, but couldn't get ahead as the coronavirus pandemic worsened and restrictions were placed on work and public life.

Things took a turn for the better when a stranger gave them the phone number for ARCHES. The trio entered into



Jaeson Small reflects on his experience with Salem's recently ended emergency housing program used to protect vulnerable people from the spreading coronavirus pandemic.

CONNOR RADNOVICH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

a new program that placed medically vulnerable homeless people in hotel rooms to shield them from the virus and reduce the chances of it spreading.

A couple weeks later, the family moved into a Keizer apartment.

"If it hadn't been for ARCHES, I don't know where we'd be right now," Small said.

Program helped 140 households

ARCHES counts them as one of a number of unexpected success stories amid the devastating impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

Of the 140 households — 183 adults and 47 children —

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Homeless

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served during the now-ended 11-week program, nine households were transitioned directly into permanent housing.

As of Thursday, 65 households were on waiting lists for local housing authorities, 72 were signed up for SNAP benefits (food stamps), two were put into substance abuse treatment and 15 were connected with the Fostering Hope Initiative.

Many of these outcomes were only possible because of the hotel placement program created in response to the pandemic, said Ashley Hamilton, program director at ARCHES within the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency.

"We got to connect with a population that we had never engaged with before," she said. "They had never signed up for housing services, which is the system we all want them to participate in."

She said this experience reinforced the reality that, despite the work that has gone into outreach, there are many more homeless people who remain uncontacted.

Hamilton said homeless people interact with a variety of institutions — such as housing authorities, federal offices or the criminal justice system — and those different groups don't always communicate with each other to coordinate care.

This can lead to people slipping through the cracks. But there are signs that conditions could also improve coming out of the first wave of the pandemic, Hamilton said.

Agencies try to plug cracks

In response to the pandemic, different advocacy groups in the greater Salem area were forced to come together for extensive meetings — far more in-depth and consequential than previous planning sessions.

During those meetings, interagency systems were created that will require continued communication even beyond the pandemic, Hamilton said.

"We communicated on a level that has been sorely missing in our community," Hamilton said. "Actually coming to the table to solve problems, that's rare."

ARCHES increased its footprint as well with the hiring of five additional outreach coordinators. These individuals made contact with folks living in homeless camps and placed in hotels, connecting them with resources.

ARCHES newest effort is to distribute \$5.2 million in rental and utility assistance to people across Marion and Polk counties by Dec. 30.

Jimmy Jones, executive director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, said it will be "difficult" to spend the entirety of that money by the end of the year due to the various restrictions that are in place.

The problem is that any money that isn't spent by Dec. 30 vanishes. It cannot be spent for any other purposes.

To qualify for rental or utility assistance, a person must: have an unexpected emergency related to COVID-19 emergency; have a past due rent or utility bill; and be at 80 percent of area median income or below.

ARCHES is in the process of developing an online application. In the meantime, the phone number to call for assistance is 503-399-9080 ext 4003.

Jones said the hotel placement program was too expensive to continue in its current form, but believes it did its part in slowing the spread of coronavirus to Salem's unsheltered population.

His concern is what comes now as cases are spiking statewide.

"We don't know how this story is going to end, and I'm terribly skeptical and afraid that this virus is going to have a much greater impact on the homeless community than we've seen," Jones said.

Camping ban lifted during COVID-19

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Salem's visible homeless population in the downtown area has also declined substantially.

One reason: In response to the pandemic, the City of Salem issued an emergency declaration that,



Dave Flowers bandages a blister on Mel Brown's foot at his tent at Wallace Marine Park in West Salem on Thursday. "I'm the cook, the doctor, the shrink and the bouncer," said Flowers. BRIAN HAYES/STATESMAN JOURNAL



Formerly homeless, Jason Small talks with his daughter Krystal Burnett in their new apartment in Keizer. CONNOR RADNOVICH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

among other things, suspended the ban on tent camping in the undeveloped areas of Wallace Marine Park and Cascades Gateway Park.

Certain amenities were placed in those areas by the city to facilitate cleaner living, such as portable toilets and large barrels of potable water.

That — paired with the clearing of homeless people from the downtown area earlier this year — has semi-permanently sent upwards of 200 people into the areas around Wallace Marine Park.

"They are definitely on the outskirts at this point," Hamilton said. "There is not a reduction in homelessness, there is just a reduction in its visibility."

What's uncertain is how long camping will be allowed to continue.

Gretchen Bennett with the City of Salem said tent camping in those parks is a temporary solution in a social-distancing age as they work to identify other options.

Those include allowing businesses to rent out parking space for a car camping, creating additional shelter space and retrofitting current spaces to allow for adequate space.

"Let's find indoor solutions for people so they can get out of the elements, but in the mean time this remains our most viable way for people to remain (safe)," Bennett said.

Sitting in their apartment in Keizer on Thursday, Small, his daughter and her wife remain grateful for the support ARCHES gave them.

But they — like the rest of the world — aren't on solid footing yet.

Rent for July is due, and they don't have the money yet. They believe they would be able to pay it, except that the 2002 Chevrolet Trailblazer that temporarily acted as their home earlier this year needed repairs.

The cost was between \$400 and \$500, despite Small doing the work himself.

They learned about ARCHES new rental and utility assistance program while talking with a reporter for this story, and began the application process later that day.

Reporter Connor Radnovich covers the Oregon Legislature and state government. Contact him at cradnovich@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6864, or follow him on Twitter at @CDRadnovich.

OSHA

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"It's been very busy for us," Corvin said.

But Corvin says that while it's "an all hands on deck situation," he said there are enough workers at the agency to field the thousands of complaints, which are essentially tips that the agency investigates.

Field staff across the state are screening complaints. Of the thousands of complaints that have been filed, the agency has done about 42 inspections, finding violations in roughly half of those inspections, Corvin said earlier this week. Several cases are still pending.

The agency has 75 people who enforce workplace safety and health in the field, and on top of that there are technical, administrative and managerial staff who also help with complaints, Corvin said. And the agency is offering virtual consultations with businesses to help them comply with health and safety rules.

"We've been able to absorb it," Corvin said of the unusually high number of complaints. "I think it's fair to say that it may have bent our system, but it didn't break it by any stretch of the imagination. So we've been able to scale up and respond to this."

There hasn't been a consistent stream of complaints, Corvin said — the volume has ebbed and flowed. The state received a lot of complaints in March, as the governor started issuing orders to close certain businesses to slow the spread of the virus, and then complaints tapered off for a bit.

What businesses should do

If you're a business or organization owner or manager, OSHA recommends that employees greet customers at entrances to remind them the face covering requirement, and to keep on hand inexpensive disposable face coverings or shields to provide in the event that a customer doesn't have one.

And businesses can offer options to shop outside the business — like curbside pickup — to people who don't want to wear a mask or cannot wear a mask due to a disability or medical condition.

According to a memo published by the agency, if a patron refuses to wear a mask, the employee should ask them whether they have a disability or medical condition that prevents them from wearing a mask. If so, they should be offered a reasonable accommodation such as curbside pickup or be asked whether a face shield is an option.

If the person does not have a medical condition or disability that prevents them from wearing a face covering, though, the patron "should be politely told that

the employer cannot serve them and that they need to leave the premises," the memo states.

But the agency says that "under no circumstances should the employer or their representative attempt to physically block an individual from entering or physically remove them from the premises."

If the person refuses to leave, the business or other organization should follow typical procedures that are used if someone refuses to leave when asked, according to Oregon OSHA.

Why face coverings are mandatory

The face covering requirement is an effort to prevent cases from spiking more after a recent resurgence, Brown said. On Thursday, the state announced the highest daily total of new COVID-19 cases since the onset of the pandemic.

Public health experts have stressed that wearing masks can help prevent spreading the virus through droplets you release when you talk, sneeze or cough.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people two years old and up wear cloth face coverings when they are with people who are not members of their immediate household, and in places where it's hard to keep a distance of at least six feet between people.

"Face coverings that cover your nose and mouth play a critical role in reducing the spread of this disease because droplets from our breath can carry the virus to others without us realizing it," Brown said in a statement. "If we all wear face coverings, practice six feet of physical distancing in public, wash our hands regularly, and stay home when we are sick, then we can avoid the worst-case scenarios that are now playing out in other states."

On Thursday, Brown announced a public awareness campaign to encourage Oregonians to wear masks.

"Wearing a face covering is a simple, common sense way to protect yourself and others," Brown said. "It's an easy way to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and save lives."

Claire Withycombe is a reporter at the Statesman Journal. Contact her at cwithycombe@statesmanjournal.com, 503-910-3821 or follow on Twitter at @kcwithycombe.












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