

# The Register-Guard

## Pandemic Distress a Harbinger

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By Bob Doppelt

The shock and stress brought on by the virtually overnight collapse of what seemed like stable economic, social and other systems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone. It offers important insights into what we can expect as the climate emergency worsens. It also provides valuable lessons about what we should do now to prepare.

The pandemic has ripped away all sense of normalcy. There is no safe haven. We can no longer count on secure jobs, housing, schools, get-togethers with friends and other things that previously seemed standard.

The climate emergency will produce some similar consequences. The failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and restore ecosystems that sequester carbon means that temperatures will, in the not too distant future, rise above the 2.7-degree Fahrenheit threshold scientists say will greatly accelerate destructive climate impacts.

Like the pandemic, one result will be abrupt, cascading disruptions to the social and economic systems we rely on for food, water, jobs, income, health, safety and other basic needs that generate significant mental health problems.

Unlike the pandemic, however, the climate emergency will also produce more extreme storms, wildfires, heat waves, droughts and other disasters that can generate mental health and psychosocial problems within 20-50% of the impacted population. And while the pandemic will end, climate impacts will continue for decades or more.

Left unaddressed, as the climate emergency worsens, we can expect a tsunami of mental health and psychosocial problems here in Lane County and worldwide far beyond anything modern society has experienced. They will profoundly affect daily functioning and threaten everyone's health, safety and well-being. They will also cause people to retreat into a self-

protective survival mode that hinders efforts to reduce the climate emergency to manageable levels.

Many nonprofit and public organizations in Lane County are working overtime to provide people with pandemic-related food, housing, income, and other basic needs. This helps relieve emotional distress. Individuals who require more assistance are being referred to mental health providers. These organizations deserve our thanks.

While important, clinical treatment and direct service programs only reach a small number of people. They also do not teach the entire population information and skills to foster and sustain mental wellness and resilience during extended emergencies.

As well, these programs are not designed to change unhealthy cultural norms and build community strengths needed to prevent and heal climate-generated mental health problems.

New thinking and expanded approaches are urgently needed to “future-proof” psychological wellbeing.

The enabling infrastructure of the enlarged approach is the formation of a local “Resilience Coordinating Council.” Its purpose is to bring together a diverse group of uncommon partners, including grass-roots members of marginalized groups, neighborhood, faith, civic, business and other local leaders to co-create innovative place-based actions that build and sustain mental wellness and resilience within the entire population.

The RCC would work closely with — and reduce the demands on — clinical therapy and direct service programs.

Many of the elements of this community-empowerment approach already exist in Lane County. They should be brought together now, before the climate emergency worsens, to help every adult and youth learn information and skills that help build mental wellness and resilience.

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