

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

CONSPIRACIST ALEX JONES AND THE LIMITS OF FREE SPEECH

Ten years ago, our country was aghast as we learned of the murders of 20 first-graders and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Many of us thought the slaughter would lead to passage of commonsense gun regulation — at the very least, outlawing the AR-15-style rifle that was used to take those innocent lives.

But none of us imagined someone would repeatedly claim the tragedy was a hoax, staged by actors as part of a government plot to confiscate Americans' firearms. Conspiracy theorist and media personality Alex Jones seized the opportunity.

Finally, Jones will pay a price for his deception. A total of 10 families eventually sued him. In the first of three cases to be heard, a jury recently ordered Jones to pay \$45.2 million in punitive damages and \$4.1 million in compensatory damages to the parents of one of the victims, 6-year-old Jesse Lewis.

The amount seems paltry in comparison to the anguish caused by Jones and others at Infowars, which claims to be the "#1 independent news service in the world, battling globalism and promoting a pro-human future." Infowars is owned by Jones.

Believers in Jones' claims took matters into their own hands, accosting the Sandy Hook families (even at events to honor their slain loved ones), abusing them online, and threatening their lives.

The parents of Noah Pozner, the youngest Sandy Hook victim, have moved nearly 10 times since the shooting and live in hiding. His mother said that conspiracists publish their new address "with the speed of light." She can't even visit Noah's grave.

I can't help but wonder what would motivate Alex Jones to regularly broadcast what he knew to be a lie, despite the damage it caused. It's an easy but disturbing answer: money.

As Washington Post editorial

writer Molly Roberts explained, "None of the events leading to the verdict should have come as a surprise.

Jones made a career out of deception — hawking hoaxes and phony cures to the credulous for decades. Pick a conspiracy theory, and he probably helped propagate it."

Jones has cast himself as the victim, saying that the attention paid to Sandy Hook has harmed his business. While Infowars' parent company recently filed for bankruptcy, Jones brings in as much as \$800,000 in a single day, hawking nutritional supplements, survivalist gear and other merchandise.

Jones has sought cover from the First Amendment to defend his actions. In his deposition, Jones stated, "If questioning public events and free speech is banned because it might hurt somebody's feelings, we are not in America anymore." He arrived at the courthouse with a piece of duct tape over his mouth that

said "Save the 1st."

Jones is right on one count: Most things we say — no matter how offensive, hurtful or untrue — are going to be protected under the First Amendment, which guards our speech from government interference and reprisal.

But in our polarized society, the consequences of free speech are much greater. And social media is an accelerant, spreading the harm.

Still, Jones' pronouncements were defamatory and therefore, unprotected. He knew it, never even mounting a defense against the defamation charges brought by the 10 Sandy Hook families. Nor did he comply with orders to hand over critical evidence, such as emails (although his attorney accidentally sent Jones' cellphone records to the opposing counsel).

So, for Jones, the unsettled matter is how much the families should be paid — a question that's now been answered for the Lewis family.

If only this had been a matter

of hurt feelings. Jones lied in the most malicious manner.

Roberts tells the story of one broadcast, when Jones alleged that a father — who spoke of holding his son with a bullet in his head — had never really held him at all. In the courtroom, Jones finally conceded that the tragedy was "100 percent real," words that were likely devoid of any empathy for the people he damaged so deeply.

Jones' intent was to put on a show for his audience and profit from it. His words fueled extremist actions. And for that, Jones must be held accountable.

A friend of mine put it this way: Jones wanted to take the ride, but not pay the freight.

We can only hope that for Alex Jones, the ride is over.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit nccrcenter.com

CARTS

FROM B1 makes it extremely difficult for grocers and retailers to get their property back.

Local clients of RMS include Target, CVS, Sprouts, Food 4 Less, Walmart, Ralphs and almost every grocery store in San Diego County, he said. The company has crews in San Diego, Chula Vista, El Cajon, Fallbrook and Vista.

Dodson said other examples of how cities can work with cart-retrieval services already exist in other cities.

"Glendale has a program in place where they really communicate with grocers so they can get these shopping carts back to be used by customers," he said. "The city of Los Angeles, particularly the LAPD, has a community policing department where they call us out before they go out, and we work cooperatively with them to be on site when the authorities are there."

Besides being wasteful, Dodson said destroying shopping carts also is illegal. A section of the California Business and Professions code states cities and counties must notify retailers if shopping carts are impounded, and they must be held 30 days before being discarded or sold.

City officials have not commented about Dodson's claim about the code violation.

In Oceanside, the cart-retrieval service Glide Rite



Christian Ramirez (right) of RMS Shopping Cart Retrieval gets ready Wednesday to put a shopping cart on a truck and return it to Walmart, where came from.

contracts with Home Depot and other stores. Roy Shauli, regional operations manager for Glide Rite, said his company coordinates with the city when doing a weekly round.

"We have great relationships with some law enforcement agencies, code enforcement officers, sanitation departments," he said about how Glide Rite works in other cities.

"But not in every city," he said. "I wish that were the case. If it were, it would be a lot better for the community and my customers."

Dodson also said many cities besides San Diego destroy shopping carts before

retrieval services can save them, and he noted that San Francisco is particularly aggressive.

Neither RMS nor Glide Rite retrieve shopping carts for Home Depot in the city of San Diego, although many of the store's orange carts can often be seen in homeless encampments.

Christina Cornell, communications officer for Home Depot, said the company does not want its shopping carts destroyed.

"We work with cities across the country to retrieve lost or stolen carts, and we're engaging with city leaders in California to do the same," she said, in an

email from company's headquarters in Atlanta.

Dobson and Shauli said their crew members approach homeless people with respect and caution when attempting to retrieve a cart, often offering them water or snack when asking for a cart. On a recent afternoon in Clairemont, RMS District Supervisor Christian Ramirez spotted a couple of shopping carts at an encampment on Shawline Street.

"I'd rather ask them if I can take it," he said, adding that he only takes carts that are empty or have nothing but trash in them. He will not dump out personal pos-

sessions, he said.

Ramirez said he retrieves 80 to 100 carts a day, and about 25 percent are from homeless people. In the Shawline encampment, he noticed two carts were being used to tie down a tarp protecting an empty encampment, so he decided to leave them behind.

He changed his mind after Richard Fish approached Ramirez and told him it was OK to take the carts, which he said were being used by his brother at the encampment.

"It's theirs, so what are you going to do?" said Fish, 57.

As he watched Ramirez load the carts into his pickup, Fish admitted he likely would just find another couple of carts to replace them.

During a recent encampment cleanup on Anna Avenue in San Diego, a police officer was asked why carts were being thrown into a trash truck rather than given back to their owners. The officer said stores would not want them after they had been in an encampment.

That didn't sit well with Shauli.

"That's really bad to have a police officer say, 'We're just going to toss it away, nobody wants this,'" he said. "First of all, that's property of Home Depot."

Dobson also said stores appreciate the return of their carts, which usually are cleaned and put back into use.

"Even a fairly dirty cart, the cost to clean it is less

than \$10," Dodson said, adding that his company also repairs shopping carts that have been damaged.

Shopping carts cost between \$150 to \$300, and Dodson said his retail clients lose an average of 5 percent to 10 percent of their carts each year.

"It adds up," he said.

Besides shopping carts, bicycle parts found in homeless encampments are also tossed into trash trucks and crushed.

"It's very concerning to us," San Diego County Bicycle Coalition Advocacy Director William Rhatigan said about the many bicycle parts that have been destroyed in recent weeks. "A lot of homeless people rely on bikes as their primary transportation."

Some of the bicycles may have been stolen, and San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria's office said in June that the city is exploring a 90-day impound program to give owners an opportunity to reclaim their property.

Bikes that are not claimed could be donated to a bicycle advocacy group that can do repairs and redistribute them under the plan discussed by the mayor's office.

Rhatigan said the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition has reached out to the mayor's office to work with them on the program. More than a month after its announcement, however, the program still has not been created.

gary.warth@suniontribune.com

GERIATRIC

FROM B1 eligible hospitals are now GED accredited was announced Thursday during a news conference at UC San Diego Health, Jacobs Medical Center.

Nationally, there are 344 accredited GEDs through the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), 56 of which are found in California.

San Diego County is home to a large population of people age 60 and older, and that demographic is projected to continue growing over the next decade.

Today, there are approximately 670,000 county residents in this age group, and by 2030, they are expected to surpass 900,000, said Nick Macchione, director of the county's Health & Human Services Agency.

Seniors are more likely than almost any other age group to visit the emergency room. The county reports that each year, about 275,000 county seniors make ER vis-

its, which leads to about one-third of all hospital admissions.

"That is why it's critically important to have all our hospitals that are eligible be geriatric certified," Macchione said.

Although specialized pediatric care for children has long been a mainstream part of the health care system, geriatric-specific care is relatively new.

The GED Accreditation program was established by ACEP in 2018 to help emergency departments better meet the health-care needs of seniors and improve their long-term health outcomes.

Receiving this accreditation means that a hospital has taken steps to become more senior-friendly by having staff trained as geriatric providers, which can include a GED-specific medical director and nurse manager.

The program also calls for improvements to the physical spaces within the department, such as providing more comfortable furniture, non-slip fall mats, warmer blankets and hearing de-

VICES, Julie Dye said. She is a clinical nurse specialist at Sharp Grossmont Hospital, which earned its gold standard GED accreditation in 2021.

"When (seniors are) picked up, especially by paramedics, they're encouraged to keep their hearing aids, glasses, things like that at home," Dye said. "But then they get here and they have a lot of trouble seeing and hearing, and that makes the visit scary and confusing, and they have trouble with the plan of care."

These departments also assess patients for dementia and other risks factors before being released, then offer support and resources to seniors after their stay to minimize subsequent hospitalizations.

The local effort to get all hospitals accredited follows years of collaboration between the county, West Health and the Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial counties.

Having every hospital improve its care for seniors helps to build a better sup-

port regional system overall, said Dimitrios Alexiou, president and CEO of the Hospital Association of San Diego & Imperial Counties.

That means that if an ambulance is diverted from one hospital to another, or if someone has a health scare far away from their primary hospital within the county, they will still be taken care of in a similar fashion.

"It starts to elevate the community standard that a senior patient can go to any of the hospitals in reach within the region, and they're going to have similar resources and similar tools," Alexiou said.

Having specialized geriatric care during emergency department visits, with follow-up care after a patient's release, has shown to improve long-term health care outcomes for seniors, said Dr. Zia Agha, West Health's chief medical officer and executive vice president.

A 2022 study from the Beaumont Health System in Michigan found that assessment and intervention of patients age 65 and older from a

geriatric specialist reduced their length of stay. The researchers found patients were more likely to be discharged instead of admitted to hospital (54 percent compared with 29 percent) and patients were also less likely to be readmitted to the hospital within 30 days (56.8 percent vs. 64 percent).

"For most patients, going to the hospital is a scary thing, and then being told that you're going to be admitted to the hospital is even more scary," Agha said. "We know that there are some patients who can easily be managed at home if the right resources are made available and their concerns are addressed."

Senior-friendly emergency departments are also associated with reduced long-term medical costs for senior patients.

A 2021 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that for each Medicare beneficiary who received GED services, there was a mean health care cost savings of \$2,436 to \$2,905 within 30

days of their emergency visit.

Now that all local hospitals have received the GED accreditation, there are other steps the county is taking to better provide care for seniors and increase the number of practicing geriatricians in the region, Macchione said.

Hospitals that currently have the bronze or silver level of accreditation are encouraged to work toward earning the gold tier.

Macchione also announced Thursday that the county is in the process of hiring its inaugural chief geriatric health officer, which he said is a first for any county in the nation. Once this new health officer steps into the role, they will work with all departments within the county to address the needs of seniors, including at the county's jails.

"That position is a real beacon position and will be the champion working with all the geriatric emergency departments," Macchione said.

lauren.mapp@suniontribune.com

SMOLENS

FROM B1 hands-on-deck initiative called "House America" to put pressure on cities, counties and states to reduce homelessness in exchange for federal resources.

Billions of dollars in funding for housing and services for homeless people was made available through the federal American Rescue Plan, the coronavirus pandemic stimulus package approved in spring 2021.

Another \$170 billion for similar purposes was included in the Build Back Better Act that died in Congress. That money is not part of the scaled-down Inflation Reduction Act. Meanwhile, the Department of Housing and Urban Development on Monday announced the federal government will make \$2.8 billion available to homeless services organizations through competitive bids.

There's no question it takes time for massive new spending to fully kick in, but it would seem by

now there would be a more positive trend in combatting homelessness than is apparent.

Homelessness in San Diego County increased 10 percent since January 2020, according to a report released in May by the San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness. The 2022 count tallied 8,427 people without a home, but local homeless experts say the real number almost certainly is higher.

In addition to the uncertainty over whether all the money and programs will make a big dent in homelessness, there's concern about whether governments are on the same page. Also, even the best of plans have been undermined by poor distribution of funds, a bureaucratic mishmash of numerous public agencies and nonprofits, and the high cost of housing.

Also, affordable housing projects, shelters and outdoor camps often run into stiff resistance from nearby residents and businesses.

San Diego and many other jurisdictions are taking a multi-

pronged approach by offering immediate shelter space, clearing out unauthorized homeless camps and providing permanent housing.

To hear federal leaders, the first two policies — particularly providing temporary shelters — are at best a finger in the dike or, at worst, wasteful and counterproductive.

"We do not want them to build shelters. Shelters are not our answer," Housing and Urban Development Secretary Marcia Fudge testified before the Senate Appropriations Committee on federal relief efforts in April 2021, according to Bloomberg. "We're hopeful the shelters are going to go away as a consequence of what we're doing."

Many local officials agree with the "Housing First" priority to provide people with permanent housing as quickly as possible. But that often has proved to be more of a longer-term approach, while triage action is needed in real time to deal with the crisis on the streets.

For some time, the public has expressed frustration at the lack of

progress on homelessness. Enforcement actions against people sleeping outdoors have become central to dealing with homelessness across California, including San Diego.

Last week, the Los Angeles City Council voted to prohibit homeless encampments within 500 feet of schools and day care centers.

The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors voted to ban homeless encampments along the American River Parkway, near schools, libraries and other areas deemed "critical infrastructure."

With homelessness seemingly pervasive and the clamor for crackdowns rising, it's easy to lose sight of incremental victories.

San Diego recently opened a women's shelter downtown, Encinitas extended its safe parking lot program for three years, and a Motel 6 in Vista is being converted to a single-room-occupancy hotel. Momentum is building to create a "safe village" where people without a home are allowed to camp, as KPBS reported on Thursday.

Those are just a few of the pos-

itive developments.

A new push is being made to help homeless people who are seniors, Black or disabled, which follows a successful effort to get homeless veterans off the street, according to Gary Warth of The San Diego Union-Tribune.

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria said 469 people experiencing homelessness have left the shelters for permanent or longer-term housing since the beginning of the year.

Yet the problem still seems overwhelming.

In the face of that, it never hurts to recognize a little upbeat symbolism while waiting for the moonshot: Not long ago, the East County safe parking lot was the site of an illegal homeless camp.

Tweet of the Week

Goes to Nabil Kapur (@sahilkapur) of NBC News.

"The Inflation Reduction Act is brought to you by the Georgia Senate runoff."

michael.smolens@suniontribune.com