

[Intro Music]

NATE SANFORD: Hi, I'm Nate Sanford. It's Wednesday, March 12. And you're listening to The ForeFront. It's a new weekly podcast about the stories you need to know this week. Produced by The Front, an independent student newsroom covering campus, Bellingham, and Whatcom County.

This week, we're joined by city news reporter Cliff Heberden. We're going to be talking about his reporting on a new law banning private prisons in Washington State, and what that might mean for immigration reform efforts in Whatcom County. But first, here's what else is going on.

SABAH RANDHAWA: To sum it up, then, you know, we have made the decision and we haven't announced it, but we are ready to move forward with the decision of requiring COVID vaccination for students and employees with exemptions similar to what we have in place for measles vaccination.

SANFORD: It's official. If students and employees want to be on Western's campus next fall, they're gonna have to get vaccinated. With a few exceptions. Western announced the requirement on May 5<sup>th</sup>. It follows similar announcements from the University of Washington and Washington State University the previous week. An email announcing the requirement came out on late Wednesday afternoon, about an hour before then, President Randhawa met with Western's board of trustees to give them a heads up.

RANDHAWA: And thanks to the board for coming together at short notice for the special meeting. So, the reason we wanted to have this conversation was about the decision to require vaccination for fall of 21. This has been an incredibly complex decision. And I want you to know, and we certainly want to Western community to know that the decision is not undertaken lightly, considerable thought has gone into it

SANFORD: Randhawa told the board that Western had been closely monitoring decisions made by UW and WSU and that he had been in close contact with Governor Inslee's office. According to the announcement, students are going to have to verify their vaccination status with the university. And for those unable to access one, Western is going to provide it when you arrive on campus. Unlike the University of Washington, Western will also require staff and faculty to get vaccinated. When Western surveyed staff and faculty earlier this year 91.5% said that they plan to get vaccinated. For students, the number was 87%. During the board meeting, Melynda Huskey, the Vice President of enrollment and Student Services, told the board members that she expects the decision to require vaccines to be a popular one.

MELYNDA HUSKEY: We know that the overwhelming majority of our students are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to have the vaccine and don't expect this to be particularly controversial, particularly with reasonable exemptions for medical and religious reasons.

SANFORD: But what about those who don't want to get vaccinated? In his email Randhawa was said that there will be an exemption policy in place similar to the one that Western already has in place for the measles vaccine. Students and staff are going to be able to seek exemptions for medical, religious, or personal reasons. Those first two exemption categories are pretty clear. But what do they mean by personal reasons? Here's what Huskey told the board.

HUSKEY: Personal reasons has not been defined in general. Our experience of those is that they would- could also be summed up as philosophical or ethical, but non-religious reasons. And so, it wouldn't necessarily be enough to say simply, I don't feel like getting a vaccination. While that would indeed be a personal reason, it wouldn't necessarily be a reason that would withstand evaluation, we would expect people to be able to articulate a reasonable position. With regard to their philosophical objection.

SANFORD: Huskey was asked to provide an example of something that might fall under the personal objections category. Huskey brought up a hypothetical scenario where a student is agnostic and doesn't feel comfortable claiming a religious exemption. But they still have a profound ethical objection to the vaccine. Huskey said that there might also be scenarios where if there is an outbreak on campus, unvaccinated students might be removed from classrooms and resident halls while continuing their coursework online. The personal exemption category is complicated. And it's one that other universities in Washington are also grappling with.

HUSKEY: So it's not super clear for any of us and I think it may become the subject of not just spirited discussion, but spirited litigation down- down the road.

SANFORD: The new vaccine requirement raises a lot of questions about what the future will look like. Western is planning for many classes to be in person. And Randhawa says he hopes the mandate will help ensure that Western students can enjoy the full on-campus experience. But for now, the future is still uncertain.

RANDHAWA: I wish we had a crystal ball that we can make predictions way ahead of time and stay with them. But you know, this has been a situation that has evolved continuously. We have tried to make the best decision given the prevailing and projected conditions, while being as flexible as possible to adapt if circumstances change.

[Transition Music]

[Protesters Chanting]

KYLE TUBBS: These chants are from a protest that took place on Saturday, May 1st. Hello, I'm Kyle Tubbs, an assistant producer of The ForeFront podcast. This weekend, reporter Cliff Heberden and I attended and covered the protest. Just as a warning this portion contains obscene language.

The protest was organized online by Bellingham advocacy groups to demonstrate and support black community members, and calls to reimagine public safety. Between 50 to 100 demonstrators organized outside the Whatcom County Courthouse and marched through the Bellingham Civic Center, which houses many Bellingham municipal buildings including the courthouse, City Hall, the post office, police station and many others. The crowd chanted the names of people killed by police, support for marginalized communities, and anti-police chants. Signs from the demonstrators read things like "respect existence or expect resistance," "stop state sanctioned violence," "Black Lives Matter," and many more. As demonstrators marched by, the sound of what's believed to be incarcerated people hitting the walls of the jail could be heard outside.

[Sound of Protestors Chanting]

TUBBS: March stopped at the Bellingham police precinct where the crowd stayed for about 40 minutes. During the demonstration a rolling blockade made up of some of the demonstrators' cars blocked the entire roadway. These cars lined the street in front and behind those marching to protect them and communicated by phone with the select few of the organizers. This has been seen as a tactic by protesters as vehicle rammings have become more common. Just in June of 2020 during the height of the protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, 50 vehicle ramming incidents took place, several taking place in Seattle. During the demonstration in front of the police precinct, a car attempted to maneuver around one of the demonstrator's cars that was part of the blockade, hitting the vehicle in the process and fleeing the scene, but it appeared no one was injured.

[Protestors Chanting]

TUBBS: Two hours after the demonstrators gathered they dispersed together, leaving an empty parking lot and graffiti on Police Department signs and the sidewalk. The Public Information Officer for the Bellingham Police Department, Lieutenant Claudia Murphy said that while a permit was not obtained to block the roadway, the lack of a permit did not give the other community members the right to endanger marchers. Murphy also said it's inherently unsafe to block the roadways because most people are not properly trained to redirect or direct traffic, and emergency first responders and public transportation are not aware of road closures. Murphy said the safest thing to do is to obtain a permit if the intention is to block the roadways. Otherwise, she says stick to the sidewalks and obey the traffic laws.

[Protestors Chanting]

[Transition Music]

SANFORD: You can read more about the stories in this episode on our website, [WesternFrontOnline.com](http://WesternFrontOnline.com). Up next Lauren Gallup and I sit down with city news reporter Cliff Heberden to talk about his new article on a ban on private prisons in Washington State and what that might mean for immigration reform efforts in Whatcom County.

[Transition Music]

SANFORD: Sweet. Well, we're now joined by Cliff Heberden, who's a city news reporter with The Front. And he has a new article out this week about this new bill banning private prisons in Washington State. Cliff thanks so much for joining us.

CLIFF HEBERDEN: My pleasure. Thank you for having me. It's an honor to be on the podcast. So, thank you.

SANFORD: It's an honor for us as well.

LAUREN GALLUP: So, Cliff your recent article focuses on the House Bill 1090, which Governor Jay Inslee signed into law in April, and the bill is intended to ban private prisons. So, what exactly does that mean? What happens now?

HEBERD: So, for Washington State, there is only one for profit prison in the whole- in the whole state, and that was Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma. And so, that detention center was reserved for immigration incarceration. And so, it won't really affect the prison system in Washington state, but it will change the landscape for immigration enforcement.

SANFORD: And how is it changing the landscape for immigration enforcement? Like where- now- now that this detention center is closing, where are people are gonna go?

HEBERDEN: It's gonna change on several- on several layers. First, the center will not close before 2025. So, it's not gonna close. ICE's operation, and ice will continue to carry out its enforcement in the Washington State. And it could be using order for stations like in Ferndale or Blaine as temporary holding zones for individuals that they will then transported to places in Oregon, like NORCOR, which is the second biggest immigration prison on the West Coast.

SANFORD: And so like, it sounds like but for activists, still, this is kind of- even though it doesn't mean the end of ICE, it's still a step in the right direction, in terms of limiting the amount of people in these private for-profit prisons in Washington.

HEBERDEN: Yeah. And one of the sources for my article, Antonio Ginatta, who actually worked on the bill as a policy maker, said that closing immigration detention centers will help remediate injustices in the immigration system emanating from the profit-based detention of individuals.

GALLUP: And speaking more broadly about ICE operations in the rest of the country, since it's a government agency, do we know how many of these for-profit facilities that they have in the country and what that landscape looks like?

HEBERDEN: Yes. So, in the United States, there are 211 immigration detention centers, and about 70% of all immigrants that are detained by ICE go to these for-profit prisons.

SANFORD: Right. And I guess it sounds like kind of one of the concerns maybe some people have raised about this is the fact that ICE, since they no longer have that option of the Northwest Detention Center might have to transport people farther to these out of state facilities.

HEBERDEN: It's either going to be a transportation issue, or it's going to give local governments not an excuse, but a prerogative to expand on local facilities and actually give more funding for public funded prisons and detention centers. Yeah.

GALLUP: I'd like to hear a little bit more about what solutions are maybe being considered in the Bellingham area to this problem that's- that's gonna be caused.

HEBERDEN: So, in Bellingham, and the Whatcom County in general, there have been multiple advocacy groups that have been fighting for immigrant rights, and notably Community to Community Development, which has been which has been for about 15 years now advocating with the local government to implement alternatives to this immigration system. And by the way, little fact, I guess it's- the director of Community to Community, but she's a really important figure. And she used to work with Cesar Chavez and the liberation of immigrant farmers back in the day, so

SANFORD: Oh, wow

HEBERDEN: I think it's, it's pretty cool to have people like that.

GALLUP: That's super cool.

HEBERDEN: Yeah. I did not get the chance to talk with her. But that would have been a real treat. Yes. So, in Bellingham, after all this work that these advocacy groups have been doing, they finally implemented in Immigration Advisory Board, which consists of 12 members who review and evaluate existing policies to provide recommendation to improve immigration policy. And so, the person I talked to on the Immigration Advisory Board, who also works with Community to Community Development, said that the policy around immigration takes a really long time to craft but they are working on a resource center that would be publicly funded and ran by actually, like, impacted people

SANFORD: Right, and the Resource Center, would that be kind of just like a place where people, undocumented people could go to kind of just like, like, what- what type of resources would that have?

HEBERDEN : So, it would be a place for people to gather and get the just- basics and the basic needs they need and they will also would be a place to help them get citizenship, driving licenses. Yeah, just stuff for them to join the community, not assimilate, per se, but at least have the tools to join, get into the workforce and provide for themselves and provide for their needs.

GALLUP: That sounds like that will be something helpful for the community in the future. Cliff, I'd also like to ask you, you know, as a reporter for The Front, what did your process look like for reporting on this story? What were your interviews like with people? And how did you find who to talk to?

HEBERDEN: Well, at first, I mostly looked for advocacy groups, because I wanted to talk to people who were actually living this. And living, you know, under fear of immigration enforcement and federal agencies like ICE. Unfortunately, I did not- I was not able to find people like that. But my top priority writing this article, I recognized it was- it's a human rights issue, first and foremost. So, I really wanted to cover the issue, not in a neutral way, but in a way that showed that there was a systemic problem, in that there were people in the community that were serving alternatives, and were trying to bring those to the table.

SANFORD: I also wanted to ask, you know, I noticed in the store, you talked with this ICE official for the article, it sounds like they didn't want to be identified by name. And I'm wondering what- what the reasoning for that was?

HEBERDEN: So, the ice official said that they did not want to be identified because, well, the issue is has been heavily politicized. And as an employee of the federal agency, they did not want to be a part of that. But also, they had security and safety concerns for their own identity and person.

SANFORD: Right, yeah. Because it because it has been a really contentious issue, you know, in Bellingham, especially. And it's something that a lot of people are pretty strongly opposed to, despite the fact that ICE you know, keeps operating in these facilities, in Ferndale and Blaine, like you were saying.

HEBERDEN: Yeah, and well, mostly with the community, the community has been fighting against is these ICE raids. But also, it has been documented that local enforcement, like BPD, has been, well in contact with immigrants, or undocumented people and have used the services of federal agencies like ICE for translation purposes. And it has been documented that there has been handoffs, between agencies, which is, well unethical and illegal. And so that's what the community has been mostly worried about.

GALLUP: And is there any indication of- of changes in those practices or, you know, references from ICE or BPD, that those policies won't continue? Do we know?

HEBERDEN: So, the city implements policy. Those practices, I mean, should be changed on paper. My sources for this article have told me that Washington state as a pretty solid basis for laws and for how we- how federal agencies should go about practicing immigration enforcement, but I mean, federal agencies, they, their- their level of agency comes from the top level of the government. So, I think that the only change we'll see in practice will be when we'll see change at the federal level.

SANFORD: Well, Cliff thank you so much for talking to us about this. And we'll be really curious to see how it goes with the Resource Center. And I guess it'll be five years until we actually figure out how closing that central center goes, but it'll be it'll be an interesting process. Thank you so much.

HEBERDEN: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

GALLUP: Thanks, Cliff.

SANFORD: Cliff is a city news reporter with The Western Front. You can read his article and others on our website, [WesternFrontOnline.com](http://WesternFrontOnline.com). You can also follow us on Instagram at [TheWesternFrontOnline](https://www.instagram.com/TheWesternFrontOnline) and on Twitter at [TheFrontOnline](https://twitter.com/TheFrontOnline), and we're also on Facebook. This episode was written and recorded by me Nate Sanford. I'm the Editor-in-Chief of The Front. Our Managing Editor, Lauren Gallup, also wrote and hosted this episode. Nolan Baker is our Chief Audio Editor and Producer. Emily Bishop and Kyle Tubbs are the Assistant Producers. Nolan Baker and I also wrote and recorded the music for this podcast. Thanks so much for listening. We'll be here next week.

[Outro Music]