

**GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE REGISTER-GUARD**

## Don't turn a medical database into a law enforcement tool

Law enforcement advocates would like to chip away at Oregonians' health privacy. They want access to prescription records maintained by the Oregon Health Authority without judicial review.

That's a terrible idea.

The OHA oversees a Prescription Drug Monitoring Program that tracks who prescribes what to whom. The database is walled off from casual review to protect privacy. Mostly only medical professionals can look at the records. That way a doctor can check to see if a patient is taking any other drugs that might react badly with something she is considering prescribing.

The program monitors prescriptions for opioids, amphetamines, narcotics, anabolic steroids and other addictive or street-popular drugs. Pharmacists enter data about patients (name, date of birth, etc.) and their prescribing doctor after filling a prescription.

Law enforcement has limited access to these state health records. They must obtain a court order as part of an active drug-related investigation. State health licensing boards also can review the data as part of an active investigation into a licensee.

Requiring law enforcement to get a warrant is the same reasonable check that applies to so many other pieces of personal information. Judicial scrutiny prevents abuse.

But Oregon Secretary of State Dennis' Richardson's auditors think it's too much of a barrier. In an audit released in December, they recommended allowing police to skip the warrant.

The idea has insidious appeal. Why not help cops catch the addicts and dealers who are buying up too many drugs or doctors who hand out prescriptions too easily?

"Trust us, we have only your best interests at heart" should never fly as a reason to give up privacy. The nation's Founders wrote the Fourth Amendment specifically to protect Americans against government's sticking its nose where it doesn't belong. History is full of cases where government abused even small invasions of privacy implemented with the best stated intentions. Look no further than the National Security Agency's program of warrantless wiretapping.

Sometimes there is an overwhelmingly compelling reason to carve out an exception to privacy, but law enforcement and state auditors need to make a much stronger case for this one. The public should make an informed choice.

People have legitimate reasons to worry about their health privacy beyond the self-evident fact that our health is no one's business but our own. If records about health conditions and prescription drug use leak out, insurance companies and employers might turn it against people. And there's no reason to trust that law enforcement or other investigators will maintain confidentiality considering the many data breaches companies and governments have had in recent years. The fewer places such information is stored, the better.

Oregon and most other states track prescriptions to help with health care, not arrests. Substance use disorders are a medical condition that requires health care intervention and support, not just criminal justice. America cannot arrest its way out of the opioid epidemic.

Turning a medical database into a law enforcement tool would violate the fundamental reason it exists.



## Affordable housing essential for prosperous community

Housing Matters Union County is a local housing collaborative whose roots began in 2016 when the Zion Lutheran Church of La Grande was asked to find housing for a family new to Union County. In a competitive rental market, that married couple struggled to find stable and secure housing for them and their children due to a bruised rental history. After experiencing firsthand the challenges of renting with a less than ideal resume and finding out many others were experiencing those same difficulties, Reverend Nelson and other concerned residents began to collaborate on how things might be made better.

Those collaborations grew into our current form, a group of several dozen participants from local government, social service agencies, landlords and other concerned residents who strongly believe that housing is the foundation of a thriving community. Sponsored by Northeast Oregon Network, we have successfully secured nearly \$300,000 in funding from these generous donors:

Center for Human Development, Grande Ronde Hospital, Zion Lutheran Church, The Collins Foundation, The Ford Family Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust.

These funds were granted to hire a full-time coordinator who works with the collaborative on several goals, including: a single-coordinated application system for local renters, tenant recruitment into positions of leadership, housing support services, a social marketing campaign geared toward community education, and expanding the local housing market to benefit all.

Studies show that the ability to obtain safe, affordable and secure housing leads to incredible benefits for families and the communities they live in; crime goes down, tax dollars are saved, and productivity is increased. With our communities being designated as "severely rent burdened," it's vital we work together to build prosperity. Want to be part of finding solutions? Join us at the Zion

### My Voice ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Matheny is the coordinator of Housing Matters Union County. My Voice columns reflect the views of the author only. My Voice columns should be 500-700 words. Submissions should include a portrait-type photograph of the author. Authors also should include their full name, age, occupation and relevant organizational memberships. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those published elsewhere. Send columns to La Grande Observer, 1406 5th St., La Grande, Ore., 97850, fax them to 541-963-7804 or email them to news@lagrandeobserver.com.

Lutheran Church in La Grande every third Monday of the month at noon and lend your voice.

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