

State psych hospital under fire for admission delays

Oregon State Hospital has backlog of commitment orders and just 671 beds

By ZANE SPARLING
Pamplin Media

SALEM — The Oregon Court of Appeals has upheld a 2019 ruling that found the state psychiatric hospital in contempt for failing to quickly admit incarcerated persons found unfit to stand trial.

Since 2002, a federal order has required the Oregon State Hospital to admit patients within seven days in cases where a trial court has issued a commitment order, but the hospital “routinely violated” that rule hundreds of times, according to an investigation by The Oregonian last year.

The appeals decision, published Dec. 30, has some in the legal establishment hoping it will spur lawmakers to act.

“If the Legislature keeps ignoring these violations, and doesn’t fully fund the state hospital, they are now opening themselves and state agencies up to a whole bunch of liabilities,” said defense attorney Amanda Thibeault. “My real hope is that the Legislature cares enough about mentally ill people to properly fund the state hospital.”

Thibeault represented Carlos Zamora-Skaar, who faced a felony burglary charge relating to a Beaverton apartment break-in in December 2018. Washington County Judge Charles D. Bailey ordered an evaluation of Zamora-Skaar’s mental fitness the following January, but by April that still hadn’t happened, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported at the time.

Judge Bailey ordered the Oregon Health Authority, which runs the hospital, to pay a \$100 fine for each day a defendant remained behind bars past the seven-day deadline. Public health authorities then appealed the ruling — to no avail.

“OSH defended against the contempt allegation based on an affirmative defense of inability to comply with the seven-day timeline, given its view that admitting more patients ... would compromise patient treatment and put patients and OSH staff at risk,” according to the appeals court decision.

Hospital administrators say they have ample reason not to fill

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Local COVID-19 death toll rises

State vaccination lags behind schedule, Union County could drop into ‘high risk’ group

By KALEB LAY
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Over the first weekend of the new year, Union County’s public health arm reported the county’s 15th death due to COVID-19.

The Center for Human Development announced the death on Sunday, Dec. 3. The Oregon

Health Authority reported the victim was a 77-year-old woman who tested positive on Dec. 10 and died on Jan. 1 at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande.

The news served as a grim reminder that even though daily case counts remain low compared to the wave of infections the county saw in late November and early December, the pandemic remains a matter of life and death in the local community.

Meanwhile, efforts to vaccinate Oregonians have lagged far behind state goals into early 2021. The Oregon Health

Authority had set a target of administering 100,000 vaccinations by Jan. 1. As of Monday, Jan. 4, only 51,255 Oregonians had received the first of two vaccine doses necessary to get full protection from the disease.

In Union County, 247 people received their first dose by Jan. 4, according to vaccine tracking data from the OHA. First doses of the COVID-19 vaccines have been reserved for frontline health care workers in an effort to shore up Oregon’s capacity to provide health care services during the pandemic.

With less than 1% of Union County’s population half-vaccinated, it is clear the road to herd immunity from COVID-19 will be long. If the state manages to reach 10,000 vaccinations per day, Oregon’s 4.2 million residents would each have had the opportunity to receive both doses of a vaccine sometime in the spring of 2023.

The most people Oregon has vaccinated in a single day so far was 7,271 on Dec. 30, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

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Taking the polar plunge into the new year



Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain

Residents react as they hit the cold waters of Wallowa Lake for the annual New Year’s Polar Plunge on Friday, Jan. 1, 2021. The air temperature was a chilly 26 degrees.

EOU Head Start to get boost from stimulus package

By DICK MASON
The Observer

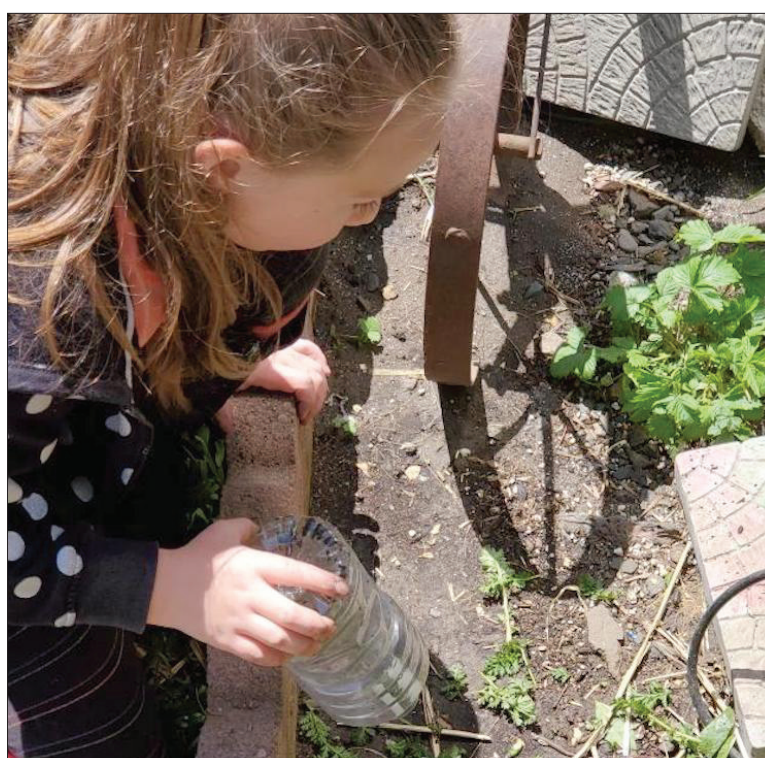
LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University Head Start is entering 2021 buoyed by good news.

The \$900 billion COVID-19 relief stimulus package President Donald Trump signed into law on Dec. 27, 2020, included \$250 million for Head Start, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services program that provides early preschool education plus nutrition and family services for children through age 5.

The amount of this funding EOU Head Start will receive is not known, but it has been determined what the funding will be spent on, said Robert Kleng, the director of EOU Head Start, which has centers in La Grande, Elgin, Union and Baker City.

“It will help us cover the added expenses we have because of COVID-19,” Kleng said.

These include the cost of purchasing additional computer equipment to help EOU Head



Eastern Oregon University Head Start/Contributed Photo

Tayah Horn of La Grande collects insects in her family’s garden as part of a bug safari during an Eastern Oregon University Head Start class in 2020. The regional program is receiving COVID-19 relief funds that will be used for computer equipment.

Start continue providing online instruction during the pandemic.

Head Start also received a boost last spring from the CARES Act. That stimulus package provided \$750 million to Head Start, and \$92,000 of that went to the EOU program, which used much of the funds to purchase computer equipment to provide online instruction to students.

EOU Head Start began providing online instruction last spring because of state COVID-19 mandates. The program now provides a combination of online and in-person instruction to children at its Elgin, Union and Baker City centers and online instruction only to children in the La Grande School District.

The reason for the differences is EOU Head Start’s centers must follow what school districts do in terms of schedules and offering online and onsite instruction. The Union, Elgin and Baker

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight
34 LOW
Rain and snow



Wednesday
39/33
A little snow

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2 sections, 12 pages
La Grande, Oregon

Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
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