

LIFE FLIGHT

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personally seen patients moved from a large hospital to a small one because the hospital in the big city has overflowed its capacity. But he has seen patients having to be flown farther than usual because a hospital isn't able to take them. A patient from Idaho, who would usually be taken to a hospital in Spokane, for example, had to go to all the way Wenatchee in central Washington instead.

That holds true for both seriously ill COVID-19 patients and those who need care after suffering some other kind of medical emergency.

"This has impacted more than just the patients that are sick with COVID,"



A Life Flight Network air ambulance lands May 2, 2020, at St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton. The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport, Pendleton, serves as the base for Life Flight in Umatilla County.

Beard said. "I don't think the general public really realizes the impact. If they

or a family member don't have a COVID-19 infection, their health care can still be

impacted."

Life Flight's air ambulance in Umatilla County

POLICE

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Hays said. The same individuals often cause repeated issues that result in a police response.

"I'm not talking about people who have psychosis due to drugs or alcohol," Hays said. "I'm talking about people specifically who, generally they stop taking their medication, and then they start digressing, getting worse and worse, requiring a lot of police contacts."

Those individuals, he explained, often are experiencing a degree of mental illness that makes them unable to care for themselves or function in society, but who also do not pose a serious risk to themselves or others. It's the pool of people circulating between those two thresholds, Hays said, that have LGPD inundated with calls for service.

"It's a broken system. It's a failed system," Hays said. "So, what happens is we start dealing with the same person over and over ... until they digress so much that they reach the threshold of (where) they pose a serious risk to themselves or others."

Hays noted this adds to the toll on his officers, having to watch these individuals deteriorate until the point where an arrest is necessary, unable to take action to interrupt their decline

until it might be too late.

"Jail is not the appropriate place for people suffering from mental illness in these circumstances," he said.

Nonetheless, some of these individuals have landed in jail, where the challenge is passed to Union County District Attorney Kelsie McDaniel.

Missing mechanisms

This challenge, caused by the lack of an effective response in the criminal justice system for dealing with people experiencing severe mental illness, is far from over once a mentally ill person is jailed, according to McDaniel.

"There's not a good (legal) mechanism for individuals (who) are on the precipice of a crisis," she said.

McDaniel said avoiding criminal prosecution of people who were jailed because of actions caused by mental illness is preferable but difficult because meeting the standards required by the alternative course of action — a civil commitment — often proves to be a challenge itself.

"The example I use: It's not just that you choose not to eat, or that you don't eat," McDaniel explained. "It's that you don't understand the fundamentals of the fact that you need to go to the grocery store to get food, that's where the food is, or that restaurants are

where the food is....

It has to be something that places them in danger in the immediate future."

If the criteria for a civil commitment can be met and receives the approval of a judge, the person can be committed to the care of the Oregon Health Authority, which can then in turn direct them to a facility able to provide care for their illness.

"The individuals that Lt. Hays has been struggling with are individuals who maybe aren't sick enough — and I hate to use that phrase — but they're not really sick enough to meet the standards for civil commitment," McDaniel said.

McDaniel said local institutions simply lack the infrastructure to deal with the mental illness crisis.

McDaniel also stressed that La Grande's homeless and transient population should not be conflated with the mentally ill individuals who have been burdening LGPD. Hays said there is some overlap between the two populations, but also noted they were not one and the same.

Canary in the coal mine

The strain the local police are under as the front line when dealing with people experiencing



Hays



McDaniel



Grigg

severe mental illness appears to be an effect of a broader challenges of mental health being felt across society, especially in recent years.

"It's kind of like the old thing, the canary in the coal mine," said Center for Human Development Mental Health Director Aaron Grigg.

Grigg said Union County, like any community, faces challenges in a broad array of mental health issues, not

only those cases that rise to a level requiring law enforcement intervention.

"We've got people that have mental health challenges anywhere from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, all the way to more severe challenges of schizophrenia and bipolar (disorder)," Grigg said.

"The community may not acknowledge that it's there, but it's there. The statistics are pretty glaring — one in five people (in the U.S.) have a mental health diagnosis of some sort."

Grigg acknowledged the rise in police calls for service is reflected in what he sees at CHD, with challenges growing for years and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Most recently, I think that we have seen a signifi-

is stationed at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton. When Life Flight announced it was adding a Pendleton base in 2012, it stated Pendleton's airport was a good location because it had a long runway, a fire station on site and was on a hill that sees less fog than some of the other locations it was considering.

Mike Weimer, Life Flight Network regional vice president of Region 2, said someone in Umatilla County who was transported by Life Flight also could end up on an air ambulance from other locations, such as La Grande, Walla Walla, Washington, or Dallesport, Washington, if the Pendleton aircraft is already on a flight.

A recent news release from Life Flight Network

stated its aircraft and specialized ambulances act as a "mobile intensive care unit" able to perform care such as ICU-level ventilation. The network recently announced new upgrades to its capabilities, including the ability for in-flight plasma transfusions.

The service transported its first suspected COVID-19 patient on March 1, 2020.

"This year has required health care workers across the region to come together to respond to this unprecedented public health crisis," Michael Griffiths, CEO of Life Flight Network, said in a statement. "Working alongside first responders, doctors, and nurses in every part of the region, we'll continue to do our part for as long as we're needed."

cant increase," Grigg said. "Right now, we're attributing a lot of that to the current situation. I think that, not only COVID-19, but some of the social, economic, political stress in our country has added to that as well, and that put a lot of strain on families and individuals. And when you have that strain on the family units, oftentimes you see an uptick in mental health challenges."

Grigg stressed that stigmatizing mental health conditions is counterproductive to resolving them, saying mental health issues should be treated as judiciously as physical health issues.

Moving forward

Union County has taken steps to address the local mental health situation, setting up a "Behavioral Health Court" designed to help stabilize those who've been caught up in the local criminal justice system as a result of their mental condition, helping them avoid a potential criminal conviction.

"One thing that I'm excited about is our Behavioral Health Court, which I don't think could come at a better time," McDaniel said. "The idea is, there are individuals that become involved in the criminal justice system because of their mental illness, and as a system I think we're on the same page that nobody

should (be treated like) a criminal because they're in crisis."

McDaniel said the Behavioral Health Court is in its infancy, but shows promise.

As far as the broader issue of mental health, Grigg said CHD is pushing a broad array of services and programs aimed at helping. Those include a mobile crisis response team, targeted outreach and prevention work, among others.

Grigg also noted CHD is offering training in a mental health crisis prevention technique known as QPR — Question, Persuade, Refer — which teaches people to recognize and engage with individuals who may be heading toward a crisis, then to refer them to resources that can help.

CHD's next QPR training is on Tuesday, Jan. 19, at 4 p.m. Details and registration for the virtual training are available online at chdinc.org or at Center for Human Development's Facebook page at [facebook.com/chdinc.org](https://www.facebook.com/chdinc.org).

"As a community, we need to be able to have some comfort level with asking those tough questions of our friends and family," Grigg said.

Those experiencing a mental health crisis or thoughts of self-harm should contact the Center for Human Development's crisis line at 541-962-8800.

CASES

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Existing systems within EOU have ample capacity to respond to and contain the current caseload."

But outbreaks do not account for all COVID-19 spread in Union County, where cases again have begun to surge. The Center for Human Development, the county's public health arm, reported 19 new cases on Thursday, Jan. 14 and seven on Friday, Jan. 15, bringing the total since Sunday to 43.

With 43 cases from Jan. 10-15 and 64 the week prior, according to The Observer's case number tracking, Union County will not have an opportunity to escape Oregon's extreme risk public health measures until county risk levels are reviewed for the next "movement week" on Jan. 25.

Daily case totals have been in some flux due to what the Center for Human Development has referred to as "discrepancies," such as discovering cases previ-

ously reported belong to the totals in other counties.

In all, Union County had reported a total of 1,095 cases of COVID-19 and 16 deaths as of Friday, Jan. 15, according to CHD. Roughly one in 68 people in Union County who have had confirmed cases of COVID-19 have died as a result.

Vaccination

While Oregon as a whole struggled to reach its vaccination goals early in the rollout of the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, that effort picked up steam in the last week.

As of Thursday, Jan. 14, 146,137 people across Oregon had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to a press release from the Oregon Health Authority. At the same point, 627 Union County residents had received their first dose, and one had been fully vaccinated, according to OHA tracking data.

Most of Union County's vaccinations were distributed to workers at Grande Ronde Hospital, which announced in a press release

on Thursday that it had vaccinated 380 employees and first responders with a first dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

Along with the La Grande-based hospital's local community partners and others within the region, Laurie Marcum, the hospital's executive director of patient care services, and members of the hospital's Vaccine Task Force have been participating in discussions with the OHA on its plan, according to the press release.

"GRH formed a diverse, interdepartmental group to comprise the task force in December when the OHA discussions began on vaccine allocation under their tiered plan," the press release stated. "The OHA vaccination plan has changed and evolved over the past several weeks, and GRH has adapted to it as quickly as possible."

The hospital also reported it is collaborating with the Center for Human Development, La Grande, on how best to manage the allocations received in support of the 1a tier vaccina-

tion distribution plan. GRH has not received any of the Pfizer vaccine, but understands it will be receiving that vaccine as well.

"At this point, we can say that in addition to receiving more of the Moderna vaccine we are working through the logistics to receive the Pfizer vaccine, which requires storage at -80C, as well as the necessary ultra-cold storage it will require," Marcum said in the release.

The state also was set to expand vaccinations to those age 65 or older as well as K-12 educators and child-care workers on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. However, that plan was in response to previous news the federal stockpile of vaccine doses would be distributed to states. Gov. Brown announced in a press release Friday morning she had received news no such federal stockpile exists, meaning no new doses are coming.

"Last night, I received disturbing news, confirmed to me directly by General Perna of Operation Warp Speed: States will not be

receiving increased shipments of vaccines from the national stockpile next week, because there is no federal reserve of doses," Gov. Brown said in the release. "I am demanding answers from the Trump Administration. I am shocked and appalled that they have set an expectation on which they could not deliver, with such grave consequences."

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen sent a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar on Thursday, demanding he reconcile the conflicting messages from the federal government by Tuesday.

"This is a deception on a national scale," Gov. Brown said. "Oregon's seniors, teachers, and all of us were depending on the promise of Oregon's share of the federal reserve of vaccines being released to us."

Federal failure

Because additional doses will not be arriving from

the federal government, Oregon is delaying its the vaccination of seniors by weeks.

Rollout of the vaccine to seniors is set to occur in four tiers, with Oregon's oldest seniors getting the vaccine first. Those 80 or older will begin receiving vaccine doses on Monday, Feb. 8. Once that population is vaccinated, doses will be made available to those age 75 or older, then to those age 70 or older, then to those age 65 or older, pending vaccine supply.

Allen said because of vaccine supply constraints it will take around 12 weeks to vaccinate all those age 65 or older.

Meanwhile, Oregon's K-12 educators and school personnel will begin receiving vaccines the week of Jan. 25, Brown announced during a press conference Friday. That includes teachers, school bus drivers, janitorial staff, coaches and others who work in education in Oregon.

SCHOOL

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through 12 also to receive in-person instruction.

Dowell said she believes the absence of seventh and eighth graders is helping sixth graders make a smoother transition to middle school by reducing distractions.

"It hasn't been as overwhelming," Dowell said.

Sixth-grade teacher Kelly Oliver asked many students what they liked most about returning to a classroom setting, and she heard a common refrain — they like being with friends and learning from each other.

"They are so excited to be back," Oliver said.

The sixth-grade students, because of COVID-19 mandates in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus, are

on campus on a hybrid schedule. Cohorts of students in alphabetically selected groups attend school on alternate days and receive online instruction via the school district's comprehensive learning program the other days.

Students at school must follow strict rules related to COVID-19 safety. Oliver said she has been very impressed with how easy it has been to get students to follow these rules. She said

this is a credit to parents preparing their students.

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