

MERKLEY

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history of expanding voting rights, including the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The United States should be moving in that direction and not curtailing voting rights, he said.

Then it was on to questions and answers. Eli Lien, an Eastern Oregon University sophomore majoring in integrated and multidisciplinary studies, asked what was happening in Congress regarding D.C. statehood. Merkley said while the House has approved a bill to make the District of Columbia a state, the Senate has not even scheduled action on it.

Anne Marie Dill of La Grande asked Merkley about his support for the Choose Medicare Act, which would make the federal health care coverage program available to all. Dill is the chair of the local chapter of Health Care for All Oregon.

Merkley said he supports Choose Medicare because the U.S. health care system is so complicated. People move from job to job and have to change insurance coverage, which can affect their families as well. The system the county has now results in people falling between the cracks of coverage, he said, and he wants to simplify the system so it's easier for people to take that insurance with them when they transition between jobs.

"So I thought it was an idea worth considering," he said.

The Choose Medicare Act would open Medicare to employers and allow them to purchase quality, affordable health care for their employees without requiring replacement of employment-based health insurance. The program also would direct Medicare to negotiate fair prices for prescription drugs.

The U.S. pays much more for drugs than other countries, Merkley said, and this was an issue President Donald Trump even pushed. Until the drug companies pushed back. He lamented the lobbying power and reach of Big Pharma. He said the administration has to stand up for the American people when it comes to negotiating for drug prices.

He also heard and addressed concerns about the spread of COVID-19, the Boardman to Hemingway transmission line, cuts to programs that help first-generation college students and the Wild and Scenic Rivers bill that Oregon's other U.S. senator, Ron Wyden, is promoting.

Merkley concluded his town hall with a discussion about China, its human rights abuses and how the country continues to reap economic benefits from weak U.S. policy to the detriment of the U.S.

The U.S. years ago opened its doors to Chinese products that undercut American companies, and often to stay in business they moved to China, where the labor was cheap but also where the Chinese government could spy on those companies and steal their technology. Now China is a country building state-of-the-art infrastructure with more than 16,000 miles of rail for bullet trains in the last eight years and a massive and improved military while also violating human rights on a regular basis and still ripping off U.S. companies.

Merkley, a member of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, said China's mistreatment of Uyghur Muslims and ethnic and religious minority groups who live in the northwestern region of Xinjiang amounts to genocide. He also said the county engages in crackdowns on freedoms in Hong Kong and other a human rights abuses.

Yet the international Olympic committee selected Beijing to host the 2022 Winter Olympics. Merkley said the parallel with the 1936 Olympics and Nazi Germany is obvious. Those Summer Olympic Games boosted Germany's international image while the county was committing human rights abuses against its Jewish people.

He called on the Olympics to move the games from China, called on sponsors to withdraw their support and called on a diplomatic boycott of the games if they remain in Beijing.

Merkley also encouraged locals who need help with federal issues to reach out to his Constituent Services Team through his office or to contact Jessica Keys, his Eastern Oregon field representative, at 541-278-1129. His staff might not be able to resolve all problems, he said, but he promised they would try.

Like at the start of his in-person town halls before the COVID-19 pandemic, Merkley highlighted a local nonprofit that benefits the community. On May 18 he put that light on the Northeast Oregon Network, or NEON.

During the pandemic, the La Grande-based organization helped locals pay rent and utility bills, provided grocery gift cards and more. NEON Executive Director Liberty Avila expanded on Merkley's remarks, explaining the organization has been responsible for helping locals obtain health insurance coverage, and at the height of the pandemic NEON helped people who tested positive with the coronavirus to quarantine.

Merkley's office sent Avila a U.S. flag that flew over the nation's Capitol, a gesture he also makes at his in-person town halls.

JOSEPH

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willing to meet with me and (tell) his side of the story," Eckstein said.

He said he has yet to begin any sort of investigation into the matter. The council has been silent on advice it received from city attorney Wyatt Baum on whether there should be an investigation. The advice was given during an executive session that was closed to the public.

The council has indicated it plans another executive session with Baum, but Eckstein said Baum was out of town until May 18, so it was on hold until he returns.

After further discussion

of an investigation, Eckstein plans to be as forthcoming as he can.

"I was hired to get the city from point A to point B and part of this is looking into the harassment claim," he said. "We will let citizens and the media know any findings we're able to release to the public."

Eckstein a 'superhero'

Over the weekend, Welch released a statement on his situation after meeting with Eckstein.

"I believe that Mr. Eckstein is an asset to our community and will be a force for positive growth and change for the employees and City Council. I look forward to continuing to work with him toward these positive changes," Welch's

statement read in part. "I greatly appreciate the opportunity to work for the city and I hope the members of the community will get to witness how great this city can be. And finally, I would like to apologize to the members of the community who were concerned about my absence from my position recently, it was due to some stress-related health concerns, be assured that I am back to work now and not going anywhere. I look forward to seeing you all on the streets and parks of Joseph."

On Monday, Welch said of his meeting with Eckstein, "I believe that he's going to help turn things around. He's here for the councilors; he's here for the employees; he's

here for the city; he's here for the people. It was a very uplifting meeting; it gave me a good feeling and gave me confidence again. He came into town almost like a superhero. I feel like he came in and saved the day. I don't know if he's even got a car, because I feel like he flew into town. I'm thinking we're going to have to put up a phone booth at City Hall for him to arrive in."

Eckstein was hired May 6 to serve as interim administrator until the city can find a permanent replacement for Braden. Because of other obligations, Eckstein can devote only one full day a week — plus extra hours as needed — to being in Joseph. He has selected Thursdays for his day to be in town.

GRAD

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much bigger issue, she said, but it would not have stopped her from pursuing a medical career.

Roberts will begin her residency with a firsthand understanding of how devastating COVID-19 can be after completing her one-year clinical rotation, when she observed doctors and nurses at work and assisted them. Many of the doctors and nurses she observed were inundated with COVID-19 cases.

"At one critical care unit in a Salem hospital, 70% of the patients had COVID-19-related issues," Roberts said.

Many such patients suffered from COVID-19 pneumonia, a condition that can cause pulmonary scarring. Roberts said she will never forget how bad the chest x-rays of these patients looked.

"They were horrible," Roberts said, although the impact of the damage was not always immediately apparent. "You would expect that these people would be gasping and lurching but they were not."

She said this is typical of COVID-19.

"Often people who have been affected (by the virus) have no outward signs," Roberts said.

Roberts will begin a three-year residency at Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic in Grandview, Washington, as a family medicine physician in June. Roberts and her

patients will be required to wear masks.

She is a strong mask advocate but worries they will make it harder for her to establish connections with some patients. Roberts explained people with hearing issues often rely on lip reading to help them understand what is being said.

Roberts also said masks will make it harder to communicate with patients because they will not be able to see when she is smiling. To make up for this, she said she will try to express positive feelings less through body language and more through the spoken word.

The physicians and nurses Roberts observed her one-year clinical rotation often seemed overwhelmed by their COVID-19 caseloads, Roberts said, but the trying conditions brought out the best in them. Roberts observed health care providers spending additional time with COVID-19 patients who were isolated and could not see many people.

"They went above and beyond because they knew they were some of the only people (the patients) could see," Roberts said. "They were showing them that 'we still care about you.'"

Roberts, who grew up in La Grande, will be one of 110 graduates from Western University of Health Sciences, an osteopathic school in Lebanon, who will receive medical degrees May 21 in a virtual graduation ceremony.

Roberts will watch the ceremony online with her family in

La Grande. She said one good thing about a virtual commencement is she will be able to see it with all of her family members. Roberts said if the ceremony had been a traditional one in Lebanon, some members of her family would not have been able to be there.

"It will be such a thrill to have my family together to see the ceremony," said Roberts, who will receive a doctor of osteopathic medicine degree from Western.

Once she completes her residency, which starts June 14, she will become a doctor of osteopathic medicine and begin practicing as a family medicine physician.

Doctors of osteopathic medicine are physicians who, along with medical doctors, are licensed to prescribe medication and perform surgery in all 50 states. DOs focus on a holistic approach to patient care.

Roberts said she welcomes the chance to practice as a family medicine physician because of the variety it will offer.

"I will be doing a little bit of everything. I will be treating everyone from babies to the elderly," said Roberts, the daughter Jess and Sheryl Roberts.

During her junior and senior years of high school, the future medical student job shadowed several Union County physicians. The chance to see doctors at work proved to be pivotal.

"It was a huge reason why I decided to pursue a career

in medicine," Roberts said. "I loved it."

The future physician encourages anyone pursuing a career in medicine to job shadow a health care professional.

"See what an average day is like," Roberts said.

She credited the education she received in the La Grande School District with providing her with the foundation to pursue a medical career.

"I owe a lot to my teachers," she said.

She also said the support she received from her family and friends has been instrumental in putting her in the position she is today.

Roberts attended Idaho State University after graduating from La Grande High, earning a bachelor's of science degree in microbiology and master's of science degree in biology. She then worked as a certified phlebotomist, a health care professional who draws blood, for three years before enrolling in 2016 at Western University of Health Sciences.

Roberts said she would like to serve as a mentor for young people in small rural communities who want to pursue medical careers.

She noted that a major challenge young people in rural communities face in becoming doctors is finding someone who can advise them on the proper path to take. She is eager to take on this role for future generations.

"I definitely want to take people under my wing," Roberts said.

FOSTER

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highlights of the document, which include the goal of preserving families and keeping children in their home as long as it is safe.

When children can't remain at home, the first step is to seek placement with other relatives.

In District 13, Blessing said, "the majority of children in foster care are placed with family."

If blood-related family can't be located, the next step is to find extended close friends who already have a relationship with the child or children.

"It's really important that we do everything we can to maintain a child's connection to their family, culture and community," she said. "That's why we're really trying to place children with people they know and have relationships with."

It's not always possible to place children with family or friends. In those cases, DHS relies on general application resource families.

Oregon DHS hired employees this year to work on recruitment and retention of foster families.

"We still have a need for those times when we can't find family or friends who are able to be a resource for the child

and their family," Blessing said.

When a child is placed with a general resource family, Blessing said the caseworker continues to search for a potential placement with family or friends.

Children are kept in their home community when possible.

"Their school remains the same and their social connections remain the same so that they can keep their connections to their culture and community," Blessing said.

To help, she said, more general application families are needed in all three counties.

Other goals of the Vision for Transformation are to limit time children spend in the foster care system, provide support to families, and ensure children are placed in "culturally appropriate homes."

Pandemic problems

A challenge to resource families is finding child care for foster children when both parents are working. Blessing said Baker, Union and Walla counties are considered "child care deserts," which means there are too few child care spots available for the number of kids who need them.

The COVID-19 pandemic added to the challenge. In addition to the lack of child care, parents also faced edu-

cation moving to an online platform.

"That's been a real hardship," Blessing said.

The pandemic necessitated special guidelines for children in foster care. For example, if a resource family traveled out of state, their foster child could not go with them and instead went to respite care. After returning, the family had to quarantine before the child returned.

Visitations with birth parents changed too — some were virtual, and some were in-person with face coverings.

"It's posed another layer of challenges," Blessing said of the pandemic. "It has undoubtedly been an extra stressor on foster families."

Recruitment

Although the goal is to place children with family or close friends, resource parents and families are necessary when that isn't an option. Blessing said homes are especially needed for children with high needs.

"Certifiers spend a lot of time to figure out who is going to be a good match to support a child and their individual needs," Blessing said.

She said DHS also is recruiting families who would welcome older children. Teenagers, she said, need a caring home, especially one that helps prepare them for adulthood.

"We have recruitment needs around older children," she said. "A lot of families who come forward want to support younger children and that's great. But we also need people to step up to provide a loving and supportive environment to older children and teenagers."

Another need is to have certified families for children who identify as LGBTQIA+.

"Sometimes a child's sexual orientation or gender identity are the very thing that brings them into care," she said. "It's really important that we're able to find resource families that will accept and support LGBTQIA+ children in our community."

Families interested in learning more about foster care can go to everychildoregon.org. Inquiries through that site also alert DHS staff.

"You can learn more about foster care, and get your questions answered," Blessing said.

Those not quite ready to foster children can volunteer in other capacities.

"What we're finding is people who start in the exploring stage, many of those families eventually become certified."

DHS "champions" such as Blessing are working to recruit and retain foster families.

The goal, she said, is to have enough families for "good placement matching — so it's a good fit for everyone."

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