

OUR VIEW

Probing wave of pharmacy closures

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat representing Oregon, has some questions about the causes for a wave of pharmacy closures, most notably those in 56 Bi-Mart stores, including the stores in Baker City, La Grande, Pendleton and Hermiston.

The senator is right to ask those questions. And although the answers he might get likely won't resurrect any pharmacies, perhaps Wyden's efforts can stave off future closures, particularly in rural areas such as Union County where residents have fewer options for filling prescriptions.

Wyden, who is chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, wrote a letter to Chiquita Brooks-LaSurre, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, a federal agency. Wyden cited the Bi-Mart pharmacy closures, noting that pharmacies across Oregon have reported as a problem the "direct and indirect remuneration" fees imposed by Medicare Part D plans and pharmacy benefit managers — which Wyden describes as "middlemen."

"I am deeply concerned that the rise of these fees has contributed to the permanent closure of 2,200 pharmacies nationwide between December 2017 and December 2020," Wyden wrote in his letter to Brooks-LaSurre.

The pharmacies are the casualty of a sale involving the Bi-Mart Corporation and Walgreens, one of the nation's largest pharmacy chains. Walgreens, as part of the purchase agreement, will buy all of Bi-Mart's pharmacies. Walgreens will operate many of Bi-Mart's already existing pharmacies, but not at some stores, including Baker City and La Grande's, according to Don Leber, Bi-Mart president of marketing and advertising.

Wyden also wrote that these fees "can be deployed as anti-competitive tactics" by the pharmacy benefit managers — companies that manage prescription drug benefits on behalf of health insurers, Medicare Part D plans and large employers, among other clients.

Wyden is calling on the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to review pharmacy closures in the U.S. over the past five years, including the nature and effect of PBM payment practices, and to use the agency's authority to regulate their fees.

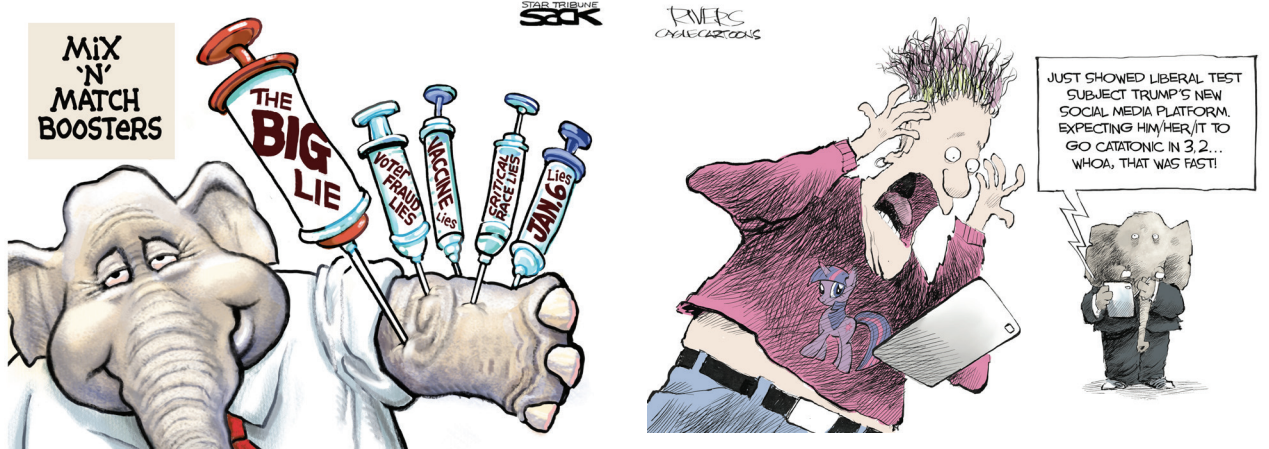
That's a good start to addressing a problem that, if recent trends are any indication, might continue to worsen in the years ahead.

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Supporting children and families as we return to in-person school

REBECCA JONES GASTON
OTHER VIEWS

With children across Oregon in school full-time for the first time since the pandemic began, they are spending significant portions of their days with teachers and other education professionals.

Educators, who are mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect, have a unique opportunity to get to know the children and families they see daily. They are there to share and experience a child's victories, strengths and challenges as they learn, grow and interact with friends at school.

As mandatory reporters, when educators have a reason to believe a child is experiencing abuse or neglect, they are required by law to report that concern to the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline by calling 855-503-SAFE (7233).

But what should an educator or other caring adult do when they see a child and family who is in need or crisis, but do not believe that a child is being abused or neglected?

Our data tells us that many people turn to the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline when they want to help but are not sure how.

This year approximately 53,000, nearly half, of the calls to the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline were not reports of suspected abuse or neglect. These are calls from educators and other members of our community who recognize that a child and family might need assistance because they are struggling with hunger, housing instability, job loss, mental or physical health issues or other stressful situations. Often these calls come to us

because the callers are not sure where to turn for support. There are many different resources and supports available in our communities to help children and families meet their needs. Sometimes, the best way to support child and family well-being and safety is to help them get plugged in to the resources they need:

Local support

- Dial 211 or text your ZIP code to 898-211 to get connected to local food, housing, child care and other supports in your community.
- Family Access Network advocates are located in schools and connect families with local resources: Call 541-693-5675 or visit FamilyAccessNetwork.org.
- NeighborImpact connects families to food resources, child care resources, utility and rental assistance: Call 541-504-2155 or visit NeighborImpact.org.

Mental and behavioral health supports

- Youthline: Call 877-968-8491, text teen2teen to 839863, chat at www.oregonyouthline.org.
- LinesForLife.org/get-help-now provides resource information for a variety of issues.
- Lines for Life Suicide Lifeline: Call 800-273-8255 (24/7) or text 273TALK to 839863 (Monday through Friday, 2-6 p.m.).
- Oregon Behavioral Health Support Line: Call 800-923-4357 (24/7).
- Military Helpline: Call 888-457-4838 (24/7) or text MIL1 to 839863 (Monday through Friday, 2-6 p.m.).
- Resources to help educators provide mental health and social

support for children and families are available at www.oregon.gov/ode/educator-resources/standards/Pages/Mental_Health_Students_Families.aspx.

Food support

- Visit www.foodfinder.oregon-foodbank.org.
- NeighborImpact.org/get-help/get-food also provides resources for finding local food banks.

Government support

- Learn about government programs and community resources for older adults and people with disabilities by contacting the Aging and Disability Resource Connection of Oregon at 855-673-2372 or www.adrcforegon.org.
- Apply for government food, cash, child care assistance and the Oregon Health Plan online at ONE.Oregon.gov or by calling 800-699-9075.

Of course, when an educator or other caring adult suspects a child is experiencing abuse or neglect, that person should — and may be required by law to — report that concern to the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline by calling 855-503-SAFE (7233).

We all want children and families in Oregon to be healthy, safe and happy. Child abuse and neglect is preventable when communities come together to support children and families, and there are many organizations, nonprofits and people who can help prevent a family's crisis from becoming a child's safety issue.

Rebecca Jones Gaston is the director of the Child Welfare Division of the Oregon Department of Human Services. Learn more about its work at oregon.gov/dhs/children.

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