

Pharmacies and patients struggle in rural Oregon

Closures, staffing shortages make pharmacies less accessible for many Oregonians

By JAMIE GOLDBERG
oregonlive.com

BAKER CITY — Rick Meis drives an hour and a half through a winding canyon from his home in Halfway every six weeks to pick up his prescriptions at a Safeway pharmacy in Baker City.

It's an onerous process that has only become tougher. One local retail pharmacy in Baker City closed shortly after Meis moved to the rural Eastern Oregon community seven years ago. Last fall, retail chain Bi-Mart then announced it was getting out of the pharmacy business entirely. That left just five pharmacies in all of Baker County — two of which are in hospitals or clinics and less accessible, and one which Meis says is currently without a full-time pharmacist.

The result for customers has been long lines and difficulty contacting overworked pharmacy staff. Meis spent several days in December calling Safeway before he was finally able to get through to someone who could tell him his prescription was ready. He arrived at the pharmacy shortly after it opened but still had to wait 30 minutes to get his medication. Friends have said they waited two hours at busier times later in the day.

"It's truly a crisis for people who live rurally, especially older people," said Meis, 69.

Between closures and pandemic-related staffing shortages, pharmacies are becoming less accessible to many Oregonians at a time when their services are in greater demand than ever.

There are 731 active retail and hospital pharmacies in Oregon, according to data provided by the Oregon Pharmacy Bureau.



Davis Carbaugh/The Observer, File

Bi-Mart announced Sept. 30, 2021, that Walgreens will acquire Bi-Mart's pharmacy business, including pharmacy patient prescription files and related pharmacy inventory of 56 Bi-Mart pharmacies in Oregon, Idaho and Washington. Without a nearby Walgreens, however, Bi-Mart pharmacy customers in La Grande had to find a local solution for their prescription needs.

That is 41 fewer than in 2016.

Roughly 60% of the counties in the state have fewer than two pharmacies per 10,000 residents. Two, Wheeler and Sherman counties, don't have any pharmacies at all.

Even before the pandemic, independent pharmacies said they were being squeezed by rising costs and declining reimbursement rates that made it harder to stay open, much less hire sufficient staff.

The pandemic has exacerbated those issues. Pharmacies have become the first stop for many to receive COVID-19 tests and vaccines, but staffing shortages have made it harder for pharmacies to keep up with demand.

"You're seeing burnout with a lot of pharmacists in Oregon and across the country," said Huy Hoang, a pharmacy professor at Pacific University and a floating pharmacist for CVS/Target. "You're seeing a lot of pharmacies closing down, mainly in the independent pharmacy sector, and now even the big chains are having to close some of their

stores because they're trying to catch up on two to three weeks of prescriptions."

He said independent pharmacies have watched their profit margins shrink as pharmacy benefit managers have reduced their reimbursements. There's little they can do, he said, because only three corporations control 75% of the U.S. market, according to Drug Channels, a pharmaceutical economics newsletter.

Open jobs skyrocket

Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden has pushed for reform in the industry and an investigation into business practices by pharmacy benefit managers.

"Pharmacies are one of the most accessible health care provider services that communities have," Hoang said. "When closures happen, patients, especially in rural communities, have to travel a lot farther for the nearest health care provider service and that just makes it more difficult for people to get the care they need."

Oregon Employment Department estimates indicate that the number of open jobs at pharmacies has skyrocketed during the pandemic.

There were an estimated 680 postings for pharmacist jobs and 1,303 job postings for pharmacy technician jobs in Oregon per year from mid-2019 to mid-2021, according to an employment department analysis of online job posting data from Help Wanted Online. That compares to an estimated 211 pharmacist job postings and 458 pharmacy technician job postings in a normal year.

That mirrors what those who work in the industry have seen on the ground. Hoang said there has been a spike in burned-out pharmacists and underpaid pharmacy technicians leaving the industry as the pandemic has increased the workload. In some cases, he said, a lack of technicians is forcing pharmacists to take on even more work to keep pharmacies open.

During the public health emergency, Oregon is allowing companies to hire pharmacists

who hold licenses in other states in an attempt to fill the void.

'It is life and death in a pharmacy'

Bi-Mart pointed to increased costs and declining reimbursements, along with Oregon's corporate activity tax, when it announced its decision to close its pharmacies last September. Those closures alone have put a significant strain on Oregon's pharmacy industry.

Bi-Mart had said its patient files would be transferred to nearby Walgreens locations and that Walgreens staff would operate pharmacies within Bi-Mart locations in areas where the drug store didn't have a nearby location.

But that hasn't been the case in many locales. Walgreens is operating pharmacies inside only six Bi-Mart stores across Oregon. While patient files have been transferred to Walgreens stores in many cities, that still leaves 31 communities with fewer pharmacy options than before. And in locations where there aren't any nearby Walgreens stores, other pharmacies have had to pick up the slack.

Jeanne Mendazona, the owner and pharmacist at Hometown Drugs in Madras and owner of three other independent pharmacies in Oregon, said she had taken on many former Bi-Mart patients. Hometown Drugs and Safeway are the only two retail pharmacies operating within the city.

With the influx of new patients and the added responsibility of providing COVID-19 testing and vaccinations on top of other vaccinations, Mendazona said she has often worked until midnight filling prescriptions. That schedule isn't sustainable, she said, and it could in fact be dangerous if pharmacists are asked to continue to take on more responsibility in the face of ongoing closures and staffing shortages.

"It is life and death in a pharmacy," Mendazona said. "We're not making hamburgers. If I put mustard on your burger and you don't like mustard, you're probably not going to die."

Regional superintendents give comments on proposed Senate bill

Bill aims to protect administrators who refuse to ignore state mandates and laws

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

EASTERN OREGON — The Oregon bill that would protect school superintendents from firings has passed in both the Oregon House and Senate, and now makes its way to Gov. Kate Brown for approval. The bill passed in the Senate 16-7, on Feb. 10 and in the House 31-25 on Feb. 25.

Senate Bill 1521, which would protect superintendents from no-cause dismissal, was brought about by recent high-profile superintendent firings. The bill itself explicitly calls out the prohibition of firing superintendents who are pressured by a school board to go against state laws and mandates, such as what happened to former Adrian School District Superintendent Kevin Purnell in August 2021.

The Senate bill is sponsored by the Senate Interim Committee on Education, and no individual senator's name was attached to the legislation.

Testimony accompanying the bill showed a large amount of opposition to the legislation, mostly from concerned parents arguing that the bill would diminish local control of schools.

"I'm certainly a local control supporter, but then at the same time we don't want superintendents that are just being let go because they won't break the law," said Morrow County School District Superintendent Dirk Dirksen. "It's kind of a catch-22 if you want to look

at it from a local control perspective."

In addition to the Adrian school district, Albany and Newberg districts fired their superintendents last year. The Newberg School Board drew ire for its banning of Pride or Black Lives Matters symbols in the classroom — and then fired its superintendent, Joe Morelock, for not enforcing the ban. Adrian's former superintendent, Purnell, was dismissed in part because he would not stand rogue against state-wide mask and vaccination mandates.

School boards asking superintendents to disregard or flout state laws and mandates puts them in "a bad



Dirksen

place," noted Grant County ESD Superintendent Robert Waltenburg.

"We've had, occasionally but not very often, superintendents being asked to act in a way that's contrary to legislation," Waltenburg said. "When your boss is asking you to do something that is illegal, what is your recourse?"

Dirksen noted that the new legislation would offer stability for schools, and that would be a boon for students.

"It just is another method for stability, and as we've experienced this COVID-19 dilemma, one of the most difficult parts is the lack of stability," Dirksen said. "That's just not good for students. I see this as a step in the right direction in regard to staff stability."

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