

“It’s All About Culture”

A conversation with new Vernonia School District Superintendent Jim Helmen

By Scott Laird

New Vernonia Superintendent Jim Helmen has only been on the job for a few weeks, after taking over from the retired Aaron Miller on July 1, but he’s already reaching out to the community and his staff in an effort to identify ways the District can improve in how they deliver education to the community’s students.



Helmen takes over a District that survived a flood 15 years ago, built an entire new campus, struggled with crippling debt, and survived COVID and a switch to distance learning, and has now come out the other side with financial stability and now a new face in the top seat.

Helmen reached out to *Vernonia’s Voice* in the middle of July to sit down and talk about ways for the District to communicate with the community. We’re happy to report that Helmen plans to continue providing the *Voice* with a regular column, “Schools Update” (see page 11), for most of our issues and use it to inform our readers about topics of interest or concern.

Helmen has a relaxed, friendly, and welcoming demeanor, but you can also tell he’s not only serious about education but also about getting to know Vernonia and ensuring the School District remains an integral part of the community.

“My initial focus is identifying those areas in our District that have shown to be effective in supporting student educational and social-emotional growth and continue to build on that success. Conversely, we also need to identify those areas within our educational system that are not supporting student learning and quickly, as a team,

develop systems and professional development to adjust this. Every decision we make must stem directly from a focus on student learning,” said Helmen during our interview. “In my first full week on the job, I have asked many questions on the educational and community history. Everyone I have spoken to has been gracious and open about sharing their experiences and ideas. There is a ton of pride here.”

I asked Helmen his thoughts on a few specific issues; the following are his responses.

Vernonia’s Voice: Let’s start with teacher and staff shortages, because that seems to be an issue. How do we get more people to come to Vernonia and work for the District?

Jim Helmen: “The first thing we must understand is that school district culture can and will affect a district’s ability to educate students. One of the first questions I asked Vernonia staff, through a survey, before the year

was out was about what they felt about the culture in the District. I believe a strong school culture goes a long way toward staff stability and drawing in qualified and quality staff into our District. What is difficult about managing culture is there are some external factors affecting teacher shortages due to COVID or because we have college students who are not going into education due to teacher pay and stresses related to an underfunded educational system in Oregon. Those are things we really can’t control. But we can control what we have and do here, and take a strong look at our culture and the way we do things.

One question I have wondered is when we are out looking for quality teachers, how do we brand and sell our District as the place to be? We have an amazing building, a strong community presence; what else?

Having a strong, supporting culture from the administrators, staff members, and community members is critical to bringing teachers and families to Vernonia. Just making sure that when prospective teachers look at Vernonia School District – the idea that you are coming to a solid educational system and that you are going to be supported, having access to effective ongoing professional development to be available, and growth opportunities. I think that’s how we bring teachers in.

We also need to ensure that as administrators, teachers, and community members, we buy into that ourselves. We’re sending the message that we have one of the top school districts around. We’re on an upward trajectory. If you want to be part of something great, Vernonia is the place to be.”

VV: At the June School Board Meeting an audience member raised concerns about building safety. What are your thoughts on school safety?

JH: “Safety is our highest priority. At the end of the day, I think we have many priorities, but if you look at today’s educational climate, school safety, specifically school shootings, is at the top of the list. As we review our school safety plans, the one that sticks out the most is Uvalde, Texas. With all the reports being circulated by the press, they are pointing out that safety protocols may not have been followed and are inconsistent to their planning; yes, hindsight is 20/20, but that still does not bring students back. We are closely looking at our safety protocols specific

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Community-Based Nurses Meet Underserved Patients Where They’re At

OHSU and Adventist Health Tillamook team up to make the case for insurance coverage of novel nursing services

By Franny White
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Oregon Health & Science University and Adventist Health Tillamook are working together to bring health care

nity members would sometimes see their blood pressure, diabetes, and other chronic conditions worsen until they needed more advanced care at a hospital.

To help these patients keep their health in check, a nurse from the Vernonia clinic began visiting patients wherever they were at – in their homes, or on the street if they didn’t have a home. The nurse asks patients how they’re doing, checks their vi-



Linn Nowland, RN, a community-based nurse at Adventist Health Tillamook’s Vernonia clinic, stands before an informational table at a recent community event. OHSU is partnering with Adventist Health to make the case for Medicaid and other health insurance payors to cover the services that community-based nurses provide for underserved residents. Photo courtesy of Adventist Health Tillamook

services directly to underserved residents of Northwest Oregon’s Tillamook and Columbia counties – and may help other U.S. communities do the same.

The collaboration aims to make the community-based nursing services program, which Adventist Health offers through its Tillamook and Vernonia primary care clinics, financially sustainable by making the case for Medicaid and other health insurance payors to cover the care the program delivers. Adventist Health currently funds the program on its own.

The effort is supported by a \$1.3 million, three-year grant from the American Nurses Foundation. It’s among 10 projects nationwide that are collectively being awarded more than \$14 million through the Reimagining Nursing Initiative, which supports bold, nurse-led ideas to help nurses meet the health care needs of the future.

“Our vision of care isn’t boxed in by the walls of a medical facility,” said the project’s lead, Seiko Izumi, Ph.D., R.N., an associate professor in the OHSU School of Nursing. “Instead of replicating the current delivery model where people come to clinics to receive care, we see nurses go out into the community where people live to deliver the care they need, and their services are covered by insurance. We’re envisioning a new world – for nurses and their communities – that embodies truly person-centered, accessible care.”

Adventist Health’s community-based nursing service program began in 2017, when the health system started operating a primary care clinic in Vernonia and realized a variety of barriers prevented many local residents from coming to the clinic. Some patients lacked reliable transportation to physically get to a clinic, while others distrusted health care systems due to historical discrimination or mental health issues, such as paranoia. The same commu-

tal signs, draws blood samples, and more. Afterward, the nurse returns to the clinic to speak with a physician who writes prescriptions, orders tests, and oversees the patient’s care based on information the nurse has gathered. The program’s nurses serve as intermediaries who coordinate the patients’ preventative care.

“Some of our patients have barriers that prevent them from accessing health care at our clinics,” said Adventist Health Tillamook Physician and Clinic Services Executive Gina Seufert, B.S.N., R.N. “Community-based nursing is all about breaking down those barriers and meeting patients on their own turf.”

Today, Adventist Health also provides some community-based nursing services through nine of its primary care clinics. Adventist Health recognizes how the program helps serve local communities, and currently covers much of the program’s costs on its own. But Seufert said a more permanent financial model could help ensure the program’s longevity – and maybe even its expansion.

OHSU has two similar community-based programs called Care Transitions Innovation, or C-TraIn, and New Directions. The OHSU programs pair nurses or social workers with eligible patients who frequently come to the OHSU emergency department, or are hospitalized at OHSU with complex chronic conditions and also experience homelessness, food insecurity, or other barriers to care. To help participating patients better manage their health, OHSU staff connect patients with primary care and other services. Both programs are currently supported by internal OHSU funding and reimbursement from one Portland-area Coordinated Care Organization, or CCO, although other CCOs are soon expected to reimburse the program’s care

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