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County gets mixed bill of health from researchers

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

In some ways, Umatilla County is getting healthier.

According to the recently completed 2018 Umatilla County Community Health Assessment, the uninsured rate has shrunk to 7%, annual medical checkups are rising, and the smoking rate is falling.

But not every health statistic is on the right trajectory and there's a significant health disparity between the county's Latino community and its general population.

As a follow-up to health assessments in 2011 and 2015, St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton and Good Shepherd Health Care System in Hermiston commissioned the Hospital Council of Northwest Ohio and the University of Toledo to survey the county again in 2018.

Tessa Elliott, a community health improvement coordinator for the Hospital Council, presented the findings at St. Anthony Tuesday.

Weight and vice

The people of Umatilla County have long struggled with their weight and 2018 was no different.

While the number of people classified as overweight dropped from 34% in 2015 to 28% in 2018, the obesity rate rose from 37% to 42%.

This rise came despite 53% of respondents reporting that they participated in vigorous physical activity within the last week and 40% eating three to four servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Umatilla County's obesity rate is significantly higher than both the U.S. and Oregon's rates.

Conversely, tobacco use was a bright spot for the county.

The 8% of respondents who said they were current smokers was a significant decrease from the previous two health assessments and much lower than the statewide and national rates.

While smoking is down, marijuana use continues to rise, hopscotching from 7% in 2011 to 11% in 2015 to 12% in 2018.

With marijuana now legal in Oregon and sold in Pendleton, audience members expected that number to continue to rise.

The survey also revealed that 1 in 5 county adult could be classified as binge drinkers, having consumed four or five drinks in one sitting over the past month. That rate is higher than the averages for Oregon and U.S.

Mental health

More than one-fifth of Umatilla County adults reported that they or a family member were diag-

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HINKLE LAYOFFS

Oregon senators respond to Hinkle closure

By PHIL WRIGHT AND
JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Oregon's two senators in Congress are pushing Union Pacific Railroad for more answers in the wake of cutting almost 200 jobs from the Hinkle Rail Yard in Hermiston.

Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats, expressed their concerns about the job cuts in a page-and-half letter Wednesday to Lance M. Fritz, chairman, president and CEO of Union Pacific Corpora-

tion. The decisions to reduce jobs at Hinkle Yard, close the supply warehouse and the mechanical locomotive shop, the senators stated, "will devastate this rural community by hamstringing the economic opportunities and stability of the entire region."

While the railroad's employees can relocate to other yards, they worried "the potential out-migration of much needed family-wage jobs in rural Eastern Oregon will do serious long-term damage to the local economy and tax base."

Paul Chalmers, director of

assessment and taxation for Umatilla County, said the total assessed value of Union Pacific's property in the county is about \$169 million, and the Hinkle Yard accounts for about 32 percent of that, or roughly \$52 million.

The yard's real market value, he said, is closer to \$140 million.

What Union Pacific decides to do with the yard could affect the value and thus the taxes on that property. The railroad could cut jobs, for example, in a move to make Hinkle more automated. That could increase the

property value.

But even major improvements seem unlikely to replace the economic loss from the jobs.

Union Pacific offered \$25,000 signing bonuses for electricians to work at Hinkle in 2018, according to reporting from *The Wall Street Journal*, and the jobs averaged \$40,000 in pay the first year and \$60,000 the next. That pay, not including the bonus, works out to an average of \$24 an hour. Using that estimate, the total payroll for the

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'Every bone in his body is happy'



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Custodian Eric Virgil sweeps the floor in a classroom at Sunridge Middle School on Tuesday in Pendleton.

Sunridge thinks outside the box to employ man with intellectual disability, wins award

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Sometimes all a guy needs is a chance to prove himself.

Consider the case of Eric Virgil. Virgil, 42, was born with an intellectual disability that makes learning, problem solving and reasoning a challenge. He has his own apartment but needs 24-hour support. The Pendleton man worked in a sheltered workshop for many years, but dreamed of having a regular job in the community. A little more than a year ago, he applied for a part-time custodian position at Sunridge Middle School.

District Facility Manager Ken Lebsock, on the hiring panel, listened to the pitch with interest. The plan was that Virgil would work with the help of his job coach at Horizon Project to keep him on track. Virgil had previous janitorial experience with Horizon Project.

"The job fit his abilities," Lebsock said. "We knew there would be a few challenges, but with the job coach, we felt comfortable with him."

Virgil got to work. For the past year, he has cleaned one of the building's wings with the zeal of gold miner who has discovered the motherlode.

Virgil is a cheerful soul, a black belt in karate who loves the Portland Trail Blazers. On a recent day, he arrived at school shortly before the final bell. He and job coach Chris Humphrey weaved their way around students as they headed to the janitor's closet. Virgil wore an emerald green Sunridge shirt, a Portland Trail Blazer hat, boots and a walkie talkie

clipped to cargo pants.

Virgil inspected his cart, a rolling cache of cleaning chemicals, stainless steel polish, a pumice stick, rags, broom, mop, feather duster, garbage bags, gloves, paper towels and a spray can containing gum remover. Humphrey stood nearby watching closely.

"There's only one roll of toilet paper," he nudged Virgil. "Better grab more."

The custodian nodded and fetched a couple more rolls from a shelf.

Humphrey, as an aide assigned to Virgil by his employer, Horizon Project, accompanies Virgil everywhere, not just to work. When Virgil heads to school, Humphrey goes too.

The pair got going down the long corridor. First stop was Mr. Jacob's wood shop. In the expansive room filled with woodworking equipment, Virgil con-

sulted a flip chart hooked to his cart. The card said "garbage" and "mop" with drawings of a garbage can and a dust mop and "time — 15 minutes." Virgil set the timer on his cart for 15 minutes and got to work. He finished just as the timer's alarm sounded.

And so it went with Humphrey giving an occasional direction or compliment. Virgil cleaned the weight room and then beelined for Mrs. Sickels' art room where he again dust mopped and emptied the trash. Eight classrooms, two locker rooms, two bathrooms and a long corridor later, Virgil clocked out after four hours on the job.

Before the hiring of Virgil, Lebsock visited with Sunridge Principal Dave Williams to confer.

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Custodian Eric Virgil sets a timer on his cart before cleaning a room that helps keep him on schedule while working his job at Sunridge Middle School on Tuesday in Pendleton.



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