

HazMat: Training provides opportunity to run drill

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cal and chemical incidents in the state. Each responder must undergo 800 hours of training.

Of the 13 HazMat teams that make up the Regional Hazardous Materials Emergency Response Teams (RHMERT) in Oregon, Hermiston's addresses emergencies all across Northeast Oregon. If the team requires extra help or more specified technology, the 102nd CST would come from Salem to help.

"The drills the 102nd CST put on are second to none," said Lt. Matt Fisher of the Umatilla Fire District, who coordinated the training and two live drills. "(They are) as realistic as we can come up with."

Much of the CST's work involves responding to reports of clandestine labs producing narcotics or methamphetamine around Oregon. Their specialized mobile lab has the ability to identify a diverse variety of hazardous materials, from drugs to explosives.

Drills like Thursday's

are important opportunities for the CST to identify the limitations and specific methods of HazMat teams across Oregon, according to Bernabo. This way, when they respond to a crisis with another team, they can tailor the response to the specific area.

It's also an opportunity for the teams like Hermiston HazMat to become acquainted with newer HazMat technologies. A robot used to assess scenes before entry was rolling around outside before the drills Thursday morning.

The first scenario that the 102nd CST designed for the team involved a lab that may have looked like it was manufacturing illicit drugs, but was actually being used to manufacture explosives.

HazMat team members entered the site two at a time, first to assess the scene, and then again to bring in the equipment needed to analyze and identify hazardous materials.

Each time a responder exits the "hot zone" — the site of the toxic event — they must leave their anal-

ysis substances aside and head to the decontamination zone to be washed accordingly, explained Bernabo.

When the team re-entered the site, they brought several sensors for radiology and gasses, as well as a device called the HazMatID 360, which looks like a digital record player, but is actually an infrared spectroscopy system that uses a laser to analyze and identify hazardous materials through a massive archive.

According to Fisher, the HazmatID 360 can identify chemical compounds down to the brand. The district hopes to upgrade their HazMatID 360 to a more portable recent version at some point.

The second scenario involved a power outage and toxin extractions from plant matter. The job of a HazMat team, Fisher said, is not to clean up the mess but to identify and contain the hazardous materials in order to protect people and the environment.

Depending on their conditioning, responders can usually remain in Level A



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Firefighters Josh Smith, left, and Jeremy Grazier investigate a mockup scene of a bomb maker while participating in a HazMat training with the Umatilla County Fire District 1 on Thursday in Hermiston.

HazMat suits, which have oxygen tanks, for up to an hour and 30 minutes, according to Captain Phillip Troy of the 102nd CST.

The Hermiston responders all hold other jobs — from paramedic to firefighter — when they aren't responding to the esti-

mated 10 calls that happen each year across Northeast Oregon.

"We wear many different hats," said Fisher.

Although the team still performs large quarterly drills and bimonthly trainings, Fisher said this can make scheduling trainings

quite tricky.

For the Hermiston HazMat team, around 80% of situations are traffic-related, including the most recent incident out of Stanfield a few weeks ago when a truck leaked 5 to 10 gallons of diesel that had to be contained.

Risk: Suicides in NW jails highlight risk for Native inmates

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ton jails. However, the report cautioned that "the small sample set of Native people who died makes it difficult to draw any conclusion with significant certainty."

The findings reinforce studies that show Native Americans, as the result of generational trauma and discrimination, experience higher rates of incarceration, chronic disease and suicide. In fact, American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest suicide rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Paula and Shannon Jefferson were among at least 14 Native Americans who perished in Washington and Oregon county jails between 2008 and 2018, the news outlets found. Suicide accounted for more than a third of those deaths. Illness was the next most common cause.

"I'll be very frank here: This is an issue of race," said Margaret Severson, a jails consultant and professor of social work at the University of Kansas.

In 2005, Severson co-authored a first-of-its-kind report on American Indian suicides in jail that found Native American inmates "tended to be less candid" when asked by jailers about their physical and mental health, as well as drug and alcohol use. The report attributed this, in part, to a reluctance to answer "intrusive" questions about men-

tal health and the fact a white officer in uniform is an authority figure who "may symbolize longstanding oppression." The report suggested that suicide risk assessments "tailored to the cultural backgrounds" of inmates might be more effective than "one-size-fits-all" screenings.

Standards developed by the American Correctional Association call for jail mental health care programs to take into account "gender, cultural and age issues." But Severson said much more work is needed to address the plight of Native Americans in jail.

"We have not been successful in figuring out what it takes to help Native American people, if they're going to be incarcerated, and maybe a lot of them should not be," Severson said.

Between 1999 and 2014, the percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native jail inmates in U.S. jails nearly doubled, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Nationally, Native Americans make up approximately 2% of the population, according to the U.S. Census. In 2014, the last year for which data is available, 3.1% of U.S. jail deaths involved American Indians, Alaska Natives, Asians, Native Hawaiians, other Pacific Islanders and people identifying as two or more races.

Death In Isolation

For Shannon Jefferson, who struggled with drug addiction, the Whatcom

County Jail was a familiar place. Records show she had been in and out of the jail 23 times over a 16 year period. Jefferson also had a history of depression and suicide attempts.

But when Jefferson went to jail in February 2014, staff failed to flag her mental health history, according to the family's attorney. She also didn't have access to the medication she'd been taking for depression.

According to a lawsuit filed by Jefferson's family, she was "upset and down on herself" and "very sad" in jail. Four days before her death, a jail nurse referred Jefferson for mental health services. That appointment was supposed to happen within 72 hours. But it didn't.

Then, two days before she died, a fellow inmate allegedly gave Jefferson an "open mouth kiss" and laughed about it. Another inmate reportedly told Jefferson that the inmate who had kissed her had just performed oral sex on another female inmate. In response, Jefferson allegedly struck the inmate.

The following day, March 9, jail staff put Jefferson in an isolation cell while they investigated the altercation. The inmate who had allegedly kissed Jefferson was also placed in an isolation cell nearby where, according to the lawsuit, she "continued to taunt" Jefferson.

The next day, jail staff interviewed Jefferson about the assault and then returned

her to her isolation cell. That afternoon, a jail officer found Jefferson hanging. She died about five hours later at the hospital.

The family's wrongful death lawsuit against Whatcom County alleges jail staff failed to provide a basic standard of care and ignored Jefferson's high risk for suicide. In addition, the lawsuit cites poor jail conditions, understaffing and overcrowding as contributing factors to Jefferson's suicide.

"Our goal is to make sure this doesn't happen again," said Ryan Dreveskracht of the Galanda Broadman law firm that represents the Jefferson's family. "I think that if any justice is served, it'll be putting Whatcom County on notice that you need to do better."

Jail Responds

Because of the pending litigation, Whatcom County Jail Chief Corrections Deputy Wendy Jones, said she couldn't comment on Jefferson's death.

But in court filings, Jones said the jail "had no reports concerning any suicidal threats or behaviors" by Jefferson during any of her previous times in jail. Additionally, Jones noted that Jefferson denied being suicidal at booking and again March 6 when she was seen by the jail nurse.

"I find no indications that any of her past behavior while in jail would have served to alert staff that suicidal behavior might be an issue while she was in custody," Jones wrote.

Since 2008, at least eight inmates have died in the Whatcom County Jail — four of them by suicide. At least three of the inmates who died were Native American, according to reports on the deaths.

The Whatcom County Jail, which was built in the 1980s, was built for 148 inmates, but routinely houses more than 200.

In 2015, Whatcom County Sheriff Bill Elfo told *The Bellingham Herald* that jail conditions were posing a risk to staff and inmates.

"It is our responsibility to operate a jail in a safe and constitutional manner, and my belief is we're falling very short of that right now," Elfo told the newspaper at the time.

As recently as 2017, Whatcom County voters rejected a ballot measure to fund a new jail.

Dreveskracht, the Jefferson family's attorney, said the Whatcom County Jail is indicative of a broader problem of overcrowding and understaffing in county jails across Washington. While he'd like to see jails address the cultural needs of Native Americans, he said jails need to first ensure the general health and welfare of inmates.

"Right now, we're just not getting the basic care that's needed," Dreveskracht said.

In an interview, Jones, the jail's chief deputy, acknowledged the challenges facing her facility. She also said that as Whatcom County has

become more diverse, her staff has become more culturally aware.

"It's taken some old habits ... or some older understandings that people had and say, 'We need to re-look at this,'" Jones said.

A Mother's Grief

Pictures of Shannon Jefferson adorn the walls of her mother's home on the Lummi reservation near Bellingham. In one photo, two of Jefferson's sons rest their heads on their mom's shoulders as she smiles into the camera.

"Even though it's been five years, it's really hard for me because I have to watch her children grow up without a mother," said Vicky Jefferson, who is caring for four of her daughter's children.

More anguish came in 2017 when her first cousin, Paula Jefferson, also died in the jail.

"All I could think was, 'Why?'" Jefferson said. "How many people are we going to lose?" Paula Jefferson's family declined to be interviewed for this story.

Today, Vicky Jefferson said she especially fears for two of her grown sons, who are struggling with addiction to drugs and have both been jailed recently. She said when a family member or someone she knows is in jail, she has trouble sleeping.

"I worry about tribal members, nephews, nieces, cousins that end up in jails," Jefferson said. "I just want it to be a safe place."

Pendleton: School board gets two new members

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Pendleton's not on the cutting edge, then they're at least at the forefront," he said.

Murphy did run into legal trouble in 2015 when he was charged with first-degree theft after repurposing doors from the old St. Anthony Hospital at his bar, 40 Taps.

He called the incident a "doozy," and said it was a case of purchasing the doors from someone who wasn't authorized to sell them.

The case was dismissed after he agreed to a civil compromise.

Both Murphy, 29, and Muller, 33, were born and raised in Pendleton and went through its school system.

But Muller took a slightly more unconventional path to the board, winning a write-in election after no one filed for Michelle Monkman's seat when she declined to run for re-election.

Muller's low-key write-in campaign worked, garnering her 187 votes, the most out of any write-in candidate in Umatilla County.

tilla County.

Pendleton attorney Michael Breiling came in a distant second with 12 votes. The rest were split among dozens of names.

Some were prominent Pendleton residents like Pendleton Mayor John Turner, Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus, and business owner Andy McAnally, while other write-ins were less auspicious, like "Spider Man," "Skippy the Turtle," and "Johnny Badass."

Reached for comment on Thursday, Muller said this was the first time she had been contacted about the write-in results.

She said she still had a decision to make when the Umatilla County Elections Division will ask her if she wants to accept the seat, but intends to do it.

If Muller declines election to the seat, the board will get a chance to appoint someone to it.

A stay-at-home mom and a part-time photographer, Muller was happy to get started on the board.

"I'm excited to dive in and learn more about how the school system runs," she said.

Forests: Specialists hand work to Blue Mountain

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to go out for public comment sometime this summer and was aligned with the new rules proposed under the Forest Plan Revision. The Resiliency Project, like the revised forest plan, used best available science from the 2000s and used a novel approach to planning.

"The withdrawal caused us to think about what we wanted to do and what it would take to realign those two alternatives to the 1990 plan," he said.

Hatfield said forest supervisors decided the most efficient way to continue the team's work was to have the data and analysis handed over to the forest staff to work with their local county commissioners, stakeholders and community members to develop projects under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Some of the work the forests will inherit from the team is a detailed fire risk assessment for the three forests and methods for

large-scale restoration.

"The Resiliency Project is not different than anything forests have done in the last 16 years," Hatfield said. "We are basically focusing in on similar themes where forests are out of whack for similar reasons."

Using a variety of methods — prescribed fire, thinning and timber harvest — Hatfield said dry ponderosa pine forests can be manipulated to decrease the chance of small wildfires turning into large and destructive fires and create a healthier forest.

"We get the forest on its way to being healthy or at least set the trajectory, though it might take 50 years to get to a desired condition," Hatfield said.

Eric Watrud, Umatilla National Forest supervisor, said the transition will include a local and community-focused approach to project planning.

"I think in the end, even with each forest taking its own localized approach, we are still planning landscape-scale projects across

the Blue Mountains," Watrud said.

Large projects are being planned across the Umatilla like the Sunrise project in Pomeroy, the Glass project on the Walla Walla District and the 114,000-acre Ellis Project straddling the North Fork John Day District based in Ukiah and the Heppner District.

"During the 60-day extended scoping comment period we held three workshops for the public to identify different values," Watrud said.

"It's been really good for our employees to have a sense of completion and accomplishment to have those projects completed and we look forward to rolling in the resiliency project as one of the types of work we do on the Umatilla," Watrud said.

Tom Montoya, supervisor of the Wallowa-Whitman, said it's important to do things at a larger scale one in order to complete environmental analysis more efficiently, but size is only one consideration.

"Bigger isn't always

better, you have to be careful how big you go," Montoya said. "It's more about looking at the risk in terms of fire transfer from the national forest to private land."

As the information across the three forests is disseminated, Montoya said not all projects will be designed on a large scale — small categorical exclusions will be incorporated where appropriate and along with more detailed analyses when necessary.

"The work the team did was a good road map in terms of trying to do planning differently and working across forest boundaries," Montoya said.

Now that some of the acres under the Resiliency Project are being managed by district and forest supervisor office staff, Montoya said they are planning on rolling out about five to eight million board feet of timber harvest in 2022 and expect to grow harvest up to 25 to 30 million board feet a year in subsequent years.