

Blue Mountain Community College furloughs employees

DOC suspends prison education contract because of COVID-19

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Blue Mountain Community College furloughed nine employees this week. The temporary release of the employees came several weeks after the Oregon Department of Corrections suspended all visits to the prison and also immediately

locked out personnel working in prison education programs. The DOC said the change was necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within the state’s correctional institutions. BMCC holds the contract to provide education services to inmates at Pendleton’s Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla, and Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker City. The nine employees worked at EOIC and TRCI. Their furlough began Monday and will last until at

least June 13. State officials originally notified educational partners on March 13 about the suspension of education contracts, but didn’t immediately stop payments to the college. That move came about a month later. “On April 12th, we again notified our education partners that we needed to suspend the education contract until the governor lifted the state of emergency,” said DOC spokeswoman Jennifer Black, via email. “The suspension, rather than a contract termination, will allow us to more

easily restart the education programs.” In a letter to inmates, state corrections director Collette Peters said the stoppage of visitation and education was the first ever in department history. “The decision did not come lightly,” she wrote. “We value visiting, we value your connections with your loved ones, and we value all of the activities and programs available to you. Visiting, education, programming, special events make incarceration what it should be — an opportunity to learn and grow and prepare

to become neighbors once again.” BMCC, the largest provider contracted by the state DOC system, is contracted to instruct about 961 inmates across the three prisons, according to Casey White-Zollman, BMCC’s vice-president of college relations and advancement. The DOC also contracts with Treasure Valley Community College, Portland Community College, Central Oregon Community College in Bend, Chemeketa Community College in Salem and Southwestern Community College in

Coos Bay. Treasure Valley, which provides education services at the Snake River Correctional Facility and at the Warner Creek Correctional Facility near Lakeview, laid off 19 employees after receiving the DOC notice. White-Zollman said BMCC’s college faculty association is working to draw up a memorandum of understanding regarding expectations for the remaining 15 full-time faculty members and four part-time faculty members who worked in the prison education program.

Clinic in Boardman gets some good news

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

BOARDMAN — The Columbia River Health Center in Boardman had a problem. To lower the spread of COVID-19, health providers across the nation were starting to see patients virtually whenever possible. Treating patients via video provides a way to examine and diagnose from afar, keeping patients and health care providers safer.

The Boardman clinic had been moving toward telemedicine but wasn’t ready to jump in. Suddenly, however, the need became urgent. “We weren’t ready to do that,” said Executive Director David Ayala. “We didn’t have the technology and now we had to put it together in a week.” Then, some good news arrived in Ayala’s inbox from the Health Resources and Services Administration. A several-page document notified him that \$55,087 in funding provided by the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations (CARES) Act was available. This was a grant with a twist. No grant application was needed and the



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Columbia River Health Center in Boardman received funding from the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act for the implementation of telemedicine equipment.

clinic hadn’t applied for one. Rather, the federal grantor decided after crunching data about HRSA-funded clinics. All the clinic had to do was agree to use the funds as intended and send periodic reports. Columbia River Health ultimately received two awards. The largest — \$600,230 — is part of \$12.4 million in federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) grants from the CARES Act to help clinics statewide to provide care for Oregonians during challenges posed by this public health crisis. The act provides \$8.3 billion in emergency funding for federal agencies to respond to the COVID-19

outbreak, including the \$100 million for Health Resources and Services Administration-funded health centers across the nation. Similar grants went to front-line health care providers in Fossil, Hillsboro, Wheeler, Portland, Boardman, Bandon, Klamath Falls, Enterprise, Roseburg, Salem and Medford and to programs run by Lincoln County, Multnomah County, Tillamook County, and Benton County. The Boardman clinic also received a \$55,087 award as part of \$1.9 million divided between 30 Oregon health centers funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration. The

funding is meant to help the health centers respond to the pandemic. After receiving notification first of the smaller grant, Ayala listened to a webinar which explained that the funds must be used only to prevent, prepare for and treat coronavirus. The second grant, he said, appears to overlap with the first one though he doesn’t yet have all the details. The clinic will invest a chunk of the funds in microphones, iPads, laptops, cell phones and other technology needed for telehealth encounters. Ayala said, before COVID-19, one downside to increasing virtual visits was a decrease in revenue. “With a face-to-face encounter, insurance pays a certain rate,” he said. “With a virtual visit, payment is less. For a phone visit, it’s even less.” He anticipates the clinic’s revenue dropping 30 or 40% for March and April. But, he said, efforts are being made to close the payment gap between virtual and face-to-face visits. “The government understands this,” Ayala said. “They know the health care system wasn’t prepared for this.”

BRIEFLY

M-F offers utility grants for small businesses

MILTON-FREEWATER — Small businesses can get up to \$1,000 in utility bill assistance grants. The city announced the program as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sewer, water, solid waste and electricity utilities can be credited with the grant. To qualify, businesses must have fewer than 25 employees and a current city of Milton-Freewater issued business license. The selection process is lottery-based. Applications must be submitted by 3:30 p.m. May 8. Applications can be found at mfcity.com. For a mailed copy call 541-938-8235 or 541-938-8233.

Number of COVID-19 cases pushes past 20

UMATILLA COUNTY — Umatilla County Public Health announced four more cases of the coronavirus on Thursday, raising the total number of people diagnosed with the disease to 22. According to a health department press release, one of the patients was in close

contact with a previously confirmed COVID-19 case and two of the patients live together. While three of the people with COVID-19 are recovering from home in self-isolation, one of the patients has been hospitalized. That person is the only one hospitalized with coronavirus in the county after another case announced on Wednesday was sent home to finish their recovery at home. Nine people who previously contracted COVID-19 are now considered recovered while the rest are still actively sick. As of Thursday, 450 COVID-19 tests have been conducted in the county, which produced 22 positives. Like previous announcements, the health department isn’t including demographic information like age range, gender or city of residence with individual case announcements. Umatilla County did release a map that showed the Hermiston and Umatilla areas each had five to nine cases, but the map doesn’t highlight communities that have had four cases or less and it won’t be updated again until Tuesday. — Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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EAST OREGONIAN

65+ years young?

You're at higher risk.

If you're 65 or older, you are at higher risk of getting very sick from the coronavirus. You must take extra care of yourself.

Stay home if you can.

Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Avoid touching your face.

Disinfect frequently touched objects.

Wash up after being in public spaces.

Stay about six feet away from others.

If you're sick, stay home and away from others.

If you have symptoms of fever, dry cough and shortness of breath, call your health care provider before going to their office.

We are all at risk, and some more than others. In challenging times, the choices you make are critical. And their impact is significant. Help slow the spread of coronavirus.

Visit [Coronavirus.gov](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus) for the latest tips and information from the CDC.

TOGETHER, WE CAN HELP SLOW THE SPREAD.

ad COUNCIL

CDC