

## Loss: ‘We’ve got fingers pointing every which way except at the problem’

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operating officer for Lifeways, told the *East Oregonian* that the building would likely continue to offer inpatient care, but as a secure residential treatment facility, which provides a lower intensity of care and operates under different staffing requirements.

Lifeways already operates secure residential treatment facility in Umatilla, known as McNary Place, and Johnsen said there is still additional need for that type of bed.

According to the news release, the Lifeways board of directors made the decision to cease offering acute care for individuals in crisis at the Hermiston facility because “the realities of COVID-19 and the health care worker shortage, especially for rural psychiatric hospital level licensure and credentialing, creates an unsustainable situation.”

Johnsen clarified that the biggest problem was finding psychiatrists, which under Oregon rules for acute psychiatric care hospitals must staff the facility 24 hours a day. She said Lifeways had received a waiver from the state allowing psychiatrists to provide care via telemedicine for 12 months. But after Aspen Springs passed six months of operation, plus months of recruitment efforts before that, with no luck finding even a single full-time psychiatrist willing to come to Hermiston, Johnsen said it became increasingly clear that Aspen Springs would not be able to meet requirements when the waiver was up.

“And so as we looked forward, and knew that waiver wouldn’t be granted, and really looked at the care that we were bound to provide, it was just untenable,” she said.

On top of that, Johnsen said it was also difficult to find enough nurses willing to work in both a psychiatric setting and a rural setting, particularly during the pandemic.

### County requesting proposals for new model of mental health care

The closure comes on the cusp of what could be a significant change in the way mental health services are handled in Umatilla County.

Shafer said the board of commissioners sent out a request for proposals, due April 26, for a single entity to provide all community mental health services for Umatilla County.

Currently, those services are divided between Lifeways, which covers behavioral health issues not related to addiction, such as depression or schizophrenia, and Umatilla County Alcohol & Drug, which covers substance abuse. But residents in need of treatment often fall under both categories at once, and Shafer said too often that results in both sides insisting the other one should take the case.

“We’ve got fingers pointing every which way except at the problem,” he said.

Johnsen said Lifeways is submitting a proposal, and that Lifeways has been successful in retaining the contract for the community mental health program in the past when it has gone out for bid. She said Lifeways already has experience providing substance use disorder services in other places, including a 30-bed treatment facility and outpatient services in Malheur County, so they are equipped to provide addiction treatment in Umatilla County too.

“We have a plan to submit and I feel we have a fully competitive application,” she said.

She said the county is requiring that proposals include plans to retain current staff of Umatilla County Alcohol & Drug to provide treatment under the

new model if they wanted to stay, so even if Lifeways took over that side of treatment, clients would still be seeing familiar faces.

### Lifeways planning next steps

Johnsen said despite the setback with Aspen Springs needing to close as an acute psychiatric hospital, Lifeways remains fully committed to serving Umatilla County residents.

“We want to remain flexible and nimble and continue to provide the community what they need,” she said.

Lifeways originally broke ground on the Aspen Springs building at 1212 Linda Ave. in July 2016, stating its intent to open the facility a year later, but instead began taking patients in September 2020. In 2019, Johnsen told the *East Oregonian* that it had taken longer than expected to meet all of the state’s strict requirements for the highest level of psychiatric care.

With the facility’s closure, she said Lifeways leadership had known it would be difficult to staff it due to the challenges of finding licensed mental health providers willing to work in rural areas. But they had expected to be able to find enough people in time.

“It’s always been a risk point for us, but we didn’t think it would get to this level,” she said.

She said they are open to reopening the building as a hospital again in the future if the psychiatrists become available to do so, but for now, the staff and board felt the best option was to focus on providing a different level of care there rather than letting the building sit empty after the waiver ran out.

“It’s a great facility and we want to make it available in whatever capacity we can,” she said.

Johnsen said Lifeways has worked with Good Shepherd Health Care System in its effort to recruit mental health providers to the area and will continue to partner with Good Shepherd and other local agencies as needed to provide resources to the community.

### ‘It’s definitely a pressing need out here’

Dennis Burke, who was CEO of Good Shepherd at the time of Aspen Springs’ ribbon cutting ceremony in July 2020, said at the ceremony that it was at times extremely difficult to find acute psychiatric care beds for patients who ended up in Good Shepherd’s emergency room and needed that level of care. Brian Sims, current CEO and president of Good Shepherd, said the organization was saddened to learn of the closure of Aspen Springs for that level of care.

“It will be a big loss, but we remain hopeful there will continue to be alternative solutions for our communities,” he said in an email.

From the county’s perspective, Shafer said converting Aspen Springs into a secure residential treatment facility would help fill a need, but not the biggest need.

County leaders have often lobbied the Oregon Legislature for additional funding to support capital projects, such as a planned expansion of the Umatilla County Jail that would help staff better accommodate people coming in while experiencing a mental health crisis or needing to detox. But Shafer said they also need to look at solutions to address the shortage of licensed mental health professionals, particularly those willing to work in a rural area. He said some sort of financial incentive for providers to work in small communities could be a start.

“It’s definitely a pressing need out here,” he said. “Infrastructure is one thing, but without professionals to run the building, it’s going to be an empty building.”

## Mr. Smith: Elected to Oregon Senate in 1992

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of the topics he chose to focus on in his farewell video.

“It has been my great honor to give the lion’s roar for broadcasters — those who run into the storm, those who stand firm in chaos to hear the voice of the people, those who hold to account the powerful — and to stand with those of the fourth estate who have the hearts of public servants,” he said.

Although he won’t be in Washington full time any more, Smith plans to use some of his time as an advisor for the association advocating for local media in an increasingly inhospitable climate.

Smith referred to himself as “a pea picker from Oregon,” albeit one whose family also owns a food processing business that produces millions of pounds of peas, corn, carrots and lima beans per year.

Smith made a name for himself locally by taking over Smith Frozen Foods and its facility in Weston. But politics also ran through his blood.

His father was an assistant agriculture secretary during the Eisenhower administration and Smith has several cousins who have served in the U.S. House and Senate in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah.

Smith won a seat representing Pendleton in the Oregon Senate as a Republican in 1992 and was elected Senate president a few years later. In 1996, Smith sought an open seat in the U.S. Senate only to narrowly lose to Ron Wyden, the first time the state elected a senator by mail. Smith would get a second shot at the Senate later that year when Mark Hatfield retired, and this time he prevailed.

Smith would go on to serve two terms in the Senate before he lost reelection to



Pamplin Media Group

**Former Oregon U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, the president of the National Association of Broadcasters, is shown above.**

Jeff Merkley in 2008, putting an end to his political career. He stayed in Washington and joined the National Association of Broadcasters a year later.

Starting next year, Smith will serve as an advisor to the broadcasters association, necessitating only a few trips to Washington per year.

In a Thursday, April 8, interview, Smith said he plans to use some of those trips to lobby Congress to take steps to save local media.

The past 20 years have not been kind to local newspapers and broadcasters.

As the internet became one of the dominant forms of consumption and communication, local businesses stopped advertising with local media outlets and started flocking to a handful of tech giants like Facebook and Google.

Local media outlets relied on these advertisers to fund their news operations, and, as a result, many of them shrank or shuttered. According to a 2019 study from the Brookings Institute, more than 65 million Americans live in a

county where there is only one newspaper or none at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these trends, and the effect is being felt locally.

In March 2020, the EO Media Group, the parent company of the *East Oregonian* and *Hermiston Herald* and the owner of more than a dozen newspapers in Oregon and Washington, laid off 47 employees company-wide, including eight locally. Since then, the company has also closed its Pendleton printing facility and laid off another 20 employees.

Working with broadcasters, Smith said the same trend is happening at local TV and radio stations, and much of that has to do with the way tech companies have dominated the advertising market.

Conducting the interview from his phone on a trip through the Columbia River Gorge on his way back to Pendleton, Smith said tech companies were not only hurting local journalism by consolidating the advertising market, but also elevating bad journalism and misinforma-

tion that tends to proliferate the web.

“They are cannibalizing the advertising market, taking broadcaster and newspaper content, putting it online and then competing against it for advertising dollars,” he said. “At the end of the day, good journalism costs money. They don’t care about localism or journalism. They just care about making money.”

Smith said the solution to local media’s decline could lie in Australia, where the country passed a law that requires tech companies to pay news outlets for their content posted on the companies’ platforms.

Nearing 70, Smith said his move back to Oregon does not presage a return to politics. He said his passion for elected office died when he lost reelection in 2008 while acknowledging the state’s leftward turn would make it difficult for a Republican to try to win.

And once he returns to Pendleton full time, he has no intention of leaving.

“I was born in Pendleton and I will die in Pendleton,” he said.

## Electric: New tech makes for easier monitoring

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web of information. On one map, little tree icons dotted UEC’s service area. The pins marked places where UEC employees used their iPads to note where they noticed a tree needs trimmed back from a power line, instantly making that information available to those in charge of vegetation management.

On another map, a grid of red squares marked where crews need to complete routine inspections on poles. When they complete the inspection, they can mark it off the list, turning that area green on the map, and note any maintenance that needs done.

Zumwalt said just a few years ago, that type of information was often on physical paper, making it much more difficult to keep track of, update and share between departments and crews. It was also difficult to spot trends. Now, with the click of a button an employee can sort maps of outage histories by cause, location, time or other factors.

“Before, there was no way to visualize this or analyze the data without a ton of work,” Zumwalt said.

Down the hall, System Operator Kathryn Kennington is stationed in a control room full of monitors. The



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**A control room at Umatilla Electric Cooperative in Hermiston oversees operations and systems across the cooperative’s coverage area.**

amount of information displayed on the screens and the ease of monitoring it has changed significantly over the years of her career in energy, she said.

“We have a lot more information at our fingertips,” she said.

After UEC installed smart meters, for example, staff at the office gained the ability to “ping” a meter and check if it is on, without needing to send someone to physically look to see if a neighborhood has lights on.

Kennington said she

has also seen how the GIS mapping has helped crews in the field respond more quickly to outages.

“The electronic mapping is definitely an improvement for newer linemen who don’t know the system as well,” she said.

Colvin agrees. On Wednesday, April 7, he was out on Southeast Ninth Street in Hermiston, overseeing work to extend power to a small subdivision being built along the road. In addition to making it easier to navigate, he said the iPads also

help with simple things, like punching in work hours electronically instead of filling out and turning in a handwritten time sheet every day.

He said new power tools and equipment purchased in recent years have also saved linemen time. That’s time they need, he said. Hermiston, Boardman and other parts of Umatilla Electric Cooperative’s service area have been growing rapidly. That brings crews out to projects like the one Colvin was at on April 7.

“There are a lot of new subdivisions,” he said.

## Missing:

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Meridian, Idaho, where she worked since 1995 as a bookkeeper. Taylor said her sister is popular with customers and is the type of person the late Les Schwab, who founded the tire company in the 1950s, wanted his employees to be like.

“She fits the image of (an ideal) Les Schwab employee to a ‘T,’” Taylor said of her sister, who has worked a total of 37 years for Les Schwab.

Taylor said her sister

brightens the spirits of customers.

“She makes them feel valued,” she said.

Despite the lack of new leads in the search for her sister, Taylor said she has reason to be hopeful, noting she is impressed with how many people are continuing to help, including individuals with the Jon Francis Foundation, a nonprofit that helps find missing persons, Valley County Search and Rescue of the McCall, Idaho, area and Oregon State Police.

Taylor is working closely with Conner of OSP on the search.

“Lt. Conner has been phenomenal,” she said.

Conner is hoping evidence leading to Hendrichs may be found now that ODOT is starting a road construction project just outside Meacham on Interstate 84. Conner is encouraging ODOT employees to be on the lookout for evidence. This includes cellphones. Conner said Hendrichs had at least two cellphones.

Conner also wants people who have cabins in the Meacham area to report anything suspicious they have noticed since the disappearance of Hendrichs.

Conner said in early May a search team will again scour the Meacham area. The effort likely will include the Jon Francis Foundation and law enforcement agencies and search and rescue organizations. Conner said he believes the odds are better that something could be found because much of the area’s snow may be gone by then.

Regardless of how the search turns out, Taylor will remain hopeful in her quest to find her sister.

“I know that God knows where she is,” she said. “God loves her more than I do, and I love her a lot.”