

# Mental health: 'We're not going to arrest our way out of this problem'

Continued from Page A1

## Wyden town hall

At a recent virtual town hall with Sen. Ron Wyden, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock told the senator that county law enforcement wanted to "get out of the mental health business."

Wyden, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, has pushed Congress in the past year to pass the CAHOOTS Act, which would fund partnerships between law enforcement and mental health professionals to form joint 24/7 crisis response teams. Seed money — \$1 billion — for a CAHOOTS-like program reimbursed through Medicaid was included in the American Rescue Plan.

Programs like CAHOOTS have yet to be tested in rural areas, but Wyden has voiced interest multiple times in trying pilot programs in Oregon, officials say.

Murdock told Wyden that Umatilla County was heavily interested in participating in a CAHOOTS program, adding the county has already set aside funding to jump on if the opportunity presented itself. He said those funds amount to roughly \$200,000 for the program.

Murdock said he "emerged from the (town hall) very optimistic about our chances."

"Our law enforcement officers are the first to say they want to get out of the mental health business," he said. "Right now they're the only option. They realize they're not trained. They want to get out of the business. We want to set up a program where we have trained personnel on the street able to respond and work with law enforcement and dispatch and so forth."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File  
**Pendleton Police Officer Ben Carleton drives up Southgate in Pendleton during a patrol on Jan. 10, 2020. Pendleton Police Chief Charles Byram said 115 out of the more than 22,000 reports in the past year were listed specifically as "mental illness."**

## De-escalating the situation

With the closure of multiple county mental health facilities in recent years, some law enforcement officials say they are responding to more calls for people struggling with mental health or addiction, at times arresting and jailing people that they say could be better served in a treatment facility.

Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan said a team of mental health professionals could help his deputies in situations they aren't trained for, including de-escalating volatile situations.

"We get some de-escalation training and whatnot, but at the end of the day, we are not trained to the level or degree that the mental health professionals are," he said. "At some point, it seems like a lot of different incidents involving people in crisis, law enforcement becomes the first phone call."

Officials varied in the extent to which they would want mental health professionals assisting situations

where there is violence. Some said they would want mental health professionals helping de-escalate a situation right from the start. Others said they would only want them helping after the fact.

Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said he sees the reason for a mental health professional to help out in some situations, but "the last thing we want to do is bring additional concerns for an officer to have to address or deal with or face."

"Officers have so many different variables thrown at them, especially during situations that are very tense or high emotion," he said. "It can be detrimental to bring additional people into a situation that the officer has to be concerned about. It's not going to be a cookie-cutter approach."

In 2020, fewer than 1% of the 24,000 calls routed to the clinic in the CAHOOTS system in Eugene required police backup, according to its website. The program also saves roughly \$8.5 million each year in the city's public

safety spending.

## 'We're not going to arrest our way out of this problem'

The commissioners, as well as county law enforcement, say that a critical way mental health workers can help the county is being "out on the streets" assisting individuals before a crime is committed.

"I think there's a lot of room there to do some field work and check on these individuals, especially those who may not have the ability to drive or get into a clinic and speak to a mental health professional," Rowan said. "They could go out and do that field work and create an environment where you try to deter something as much as you can and head something off before it gets out of hand."

Pendleton Police Chief Charles Byram said 115 out of more than 22,000 reports in the past year were codified specifically as "mental illness." After reviewing perhaps 70 or 80 of the

reports, Byram said almost every call was a situation where law enforcement wasn't needed.

But even that number is "just scratching the surface."

"A majority of the criminal drivers within this community, and I'll dare to say most communities, is going to be drug- and alcohol-related or mental illness-related or a combination thereof," he said.

Byram said he's interested in exploring "anything to get our officers out of the business of responding to legitimate mental health crises," but added a caveat.

"Just because somebody is deemed mentally ill or is under the influence of a controlled substance does not mean that they're not committing a crime," he said. "We definitely have to have a seat at the table for every situation to determine if they're culpable for their actions."

Edmiston expressed a similar interest in the program. He said some mental health-related issues can force officers to arrest people in crisis for low-level crimes, and like other officials, he's questioned if that's always the right call.

"Where we've ended up is, we know we're arresting them and putting them in jail for disorderly conduct, and we know they don't belong there," he said, adding "we're open to any idea to address the problem. However, I firmly and adamantly believe that we're only going to get there through legislative changes."

Last week, the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office responded to multiple calls over several days from a family in Hermiston concerned for their loved one. Deputies could have initially arrested the person on charges of harassment, but left each time because the person was "seriously

mentally ill," Rowan said.

The sheriff's office reached out to the county's main mental health provider for help, "but they weren't able to get a crisis worker there," Rowan said. Eventually, as the situation escalated over several days, the deputies returned and made the arrest on charges of attempted arson.

"In that same initial response, if we had a mental health crisis worker with us, maybe additional calls for service to that location would have been avoided," he said.

Rowan described the situation as "frustrating to say the least."

"Although law enforcement has a desire to be responsive and be a team player, the other side of the equation isn't always a willing participant," he said. "So that's where it is today that we don't always get a crisis worker that will respond with us to those incidents, even though the person we're dealing with may be their client. It just seems counterproductive. There needs to be a willingness to move the ball forward."

For a crisis intervention team to work well, county law enforcement pointed to several things they would want to see, including buy-in from various community groups, resources and funding allocated through the state legislature, oversight and accountability.

"Nobody wants to be in the situation that we're in right now," Rowan said. "We can't keep doing the same thing that we've been doing, because it's obvious to us that it's not working. Changing the plan and coming up with a better approach I believe will be beneficial to all."

Edmiston echoed Rowan's sentiment.

"We're not going to arrest our way out of this problem," he said. "And we know that."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**Cowboys watch from the infield as Dawson Hay of Wildwood, Alberta, rides Rise and Shine on the opening day of the 2019 Pendleton Round-Up.**

## Round-Up:

Continued from Page A1

Round-Up Publicity Director Pat Reay said it was the "first positive announcement" they've heard from the governor in 2021 and they were happy to hear it.

In addition to getting state approval, Reay said the Round-Up needs to work with other entities like the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association and Umatilla County Public Health before proceeding. The Round-Up expects to finalize its safety plan sometime during mid-summer.

In the meantime, the Round-Up continues to gear up for September. The association has already announced dates for bull riding events in the days leading up to Round-Up and intends to reveal the main act at the kickoff concert soon.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said he wants to take Brown at her word because he "cannot fathom taking another \$65 million hit by not having Round-Up."

"I hope she also understands that the Round-Up can't operate at half mast," he said. "They have to go full bore, in terms of no crowd limitations. But she's confident that by September we're going to have it, and I like to take her at her word."

Pendleton Mayor John Turner, a nonvoting member of the Round-Up board, said the governor's comments would increase the Round-Up's confidence in holding a full event.

For the state to progress and for events to be held safely, officials say that regions must have high vaccination rates.

But in Umatilla County, the least-vaccinated county in Oregon, vaccination rates have declined rapidly in recent weeks, leaving a greater vaccine supply than there is demand.

Nearly 25% of Umatilla County residents have received at least one shot, according to a *Oregonian/OregonLive* database, though the county has the second-highest COVID-19 case rate. That's compared to the approximately 46% of all Oregonians who have received at least their first dose.

"I understand people's individual rights not to get a shot if they choose not to," Murdock said. "I just hope they consider the fact that might have an impact on events like Round-Up if they choose not to."

He added: "If they're going to use vaccination rate as a standard to determine whether or not these things are going to occur, then I think a vaccination is a small price to pay to make sure these things go on and get back to normal."

The Pendleton Round-Up is scheduled for Sept. 15 through Sept. 18.

## Project:

Continued from Page A1

was founded to take advantage of \$7 million in state funding, that left the landowners on the hook for the remainder of the projected \$46 million price tag. With no credit history in the district's name, landowners committed the remainder of the funding in equity and debt service.

"I think 75 to 80% of our budget was financed and therefore we need to use the water over as many acres as possible so we can keep our debt service cost down and get things paid for," St. Hilaire said.

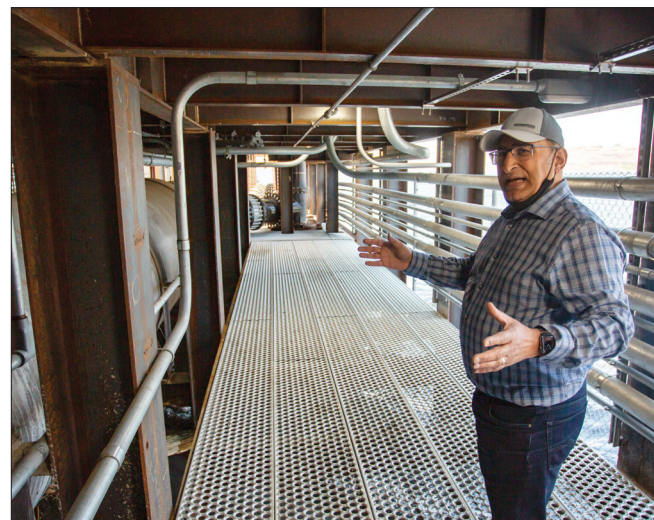
## Decades in the making

Among those who spoke at the dedication was Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, who used the opportunity to outline the decades-long process that led to the East Project. Levy, whose husband's farm is among those in the East Project's distribution area, explained that in 1954, just one year after she was born, the Bureau of Reclamation made a determination that the irrigable land in the Umatilla River watershed exceeded available groundwater supply. She went on to outline various milestones that led to the East Project.

"What makes this project so unique is the level of commitment and decades of collaboration, trust building and compromise that lead to our ability to be here today," she said.

Levy said the water projects are something the state needs to commit to in the years to come and not forget that the true scope of the project has yet to be completed. She added that she has submitted a \$6 million funding request to fund the Ordinance Project, the third of three water projects proposed in 2015 that include the East Project and West Project, which was completed in May 2020.

Levy extended her thanks to U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., Oregon



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**IRZ Consulting President Fred Ziari explains the technical specifications of the East Project pumping station from within the facility during a tour of the facility on Tuesday, May 11, 2021.**

Sens. Bill Hansell, R-Athens, and Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, for securing \$11 million in funding for the East and West projects in 2015, members of the Oregon Water Resources Division, the CTUIR and several other agencies for their continued negotiations and cooperation.

## Higher value crops

Although the primary goal of the project is to allow for the recharge of aquifers in the Columbia Basin, the increase in consistent water supply will allow farmers in the region to grow higher value crops, such as onions, potatoes and other produce that yield higher dollar returns per acre.

St. Hilaire said that the sandy soil and dry climate requires a lot of water to grow crops, but when water is plentiful these factors make for perfect conditions.

"The soil type and the climate over here are extremely dry and it requires a lot of water to grow things," he said. "On the flip side, if you have water there are a lot of different types of high-value crops you can grow."

St. Hilaire said farmers have been hurt in recent years by low commodity prices, and that the ability to switch to higher value crops not only helps farms but also the local economy.

"Water is the critical resource, so for us it means the possibility of farming some

high-value crops, including organic, and having a consistent source of water for them," he said.

All of these advancements in farming would not be possible without an efficient means of transporting the water from the Columbia River.

## Technological advancements aid efficiency

Fred Ziari, president of Hermiston-based IRZ Consulting, said of the thousands of irrigation projects his company has completed in all corners of the globe, the East Project ranked at the top in both design complexity and technological advancements. Ziari credits not only his staff, but the farmers behind the project who prioritized technology and efficiency throughout the project. Ziari said the main pumping station and the booster pumps at each outlet are managed remotely and can be monitored for function and flow rate from a cellphone.

"We had foresight from the farmers," he said. "They didn't want to shortchange the system, so they wanted the highest level of technology that is totally controlled and measured 24/7."

Ziari added that each pump has a variable-frequency drive allowing it to scale quickly to the needed flow rate. The pumping station is capable of moving up to 100,000 gallons

per minute at peak operation.

Moving that amount water is no small feat; the pumping station, located 7 miles east of McNary on the Columbia River, utilizes 19,000 horsepower worth of pumps to carry the water out of the station in an 84-inch diameter pipe and across roughly 8 miles over a 500-foot elevation gain.

"It was a labor of love from our side," Ziari said.

In addition to technologically advanced mechanical equipment, Ziari credits the use of fiberglass reinforced pipe (FRP) with keeping costs down and increasing the efficiency of the design.

"First, its 35% cheaper than steel and second, it has tremendous energy efficiency," he said. "I would have needed to add an additional 3,500 horsepower if I had steel pipe rather than this FRP."

## Next steps

For Northeast Oregon Water Association Director J.R. Cook, the dedication was both a celebration of how far the project has come and a reminder of how far they have to go.

"What we've been trying to remind people is this is just the cornerstone," he said. "Now we've got the mitigation program, we've got to get the groundwater savings program done and we have a huge project in the Ordinance pipeline that needs to be finished."

Cook said the past few years have been a constant struggle to keep everyone up to date with the project and its purpose. In addition to transitions in Salem, he said he has had to ensure that a new generation of landowners within the land base are brought up to speed on the process as well.

"What made this work was commitments that we don't just use these projects to go squirt a bunch more water on, grow a bunch more vegetables and make more money," he said. "It had to be a uniform effort of mitigating water, groundwater saving all of the additional benefits than just the financial side."