

HEPPNER'S GREG GRANT RECEIVES COACHING HONOR

SPORTS, B1

TOBY KEITH TO HEADLINE PENDLETON WHISKY FEST

REGION, A3

A graduate watches a slideshow of high school memories during Weston-McEwen High School's graduation ceremony Thursday, May 27, 2021, at the M-F Drive-In Theater in Milton-Freewater. Robert McLean/R. A. McLean Photography

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UMATILLA COUNTY

County treatment in new hands

Lifeways plans to protest the county's decision, according to its director

By BRYCE DOLE East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Umatilla County's mental health services will undergo a significant change this year as the county brings in a new provider to handle mental health and addiction treatment.

In an administrative meeting on Wednesday, May 26, Umatilla County commissioners voted in agreement with a unanimous recommendation from a five-person committee to award a contract to Community Counseling Solutions as its new mental health and addiction services provider.



Lindsay



Shafer

"For somebody in crisis, whether they're struggling with mental health, or if they're under the influence of intoxicants, or both, which is usually the case, they're going to get the service they need immediately," said Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer, the county's liaison for mental health.

The committee was composed of an educator, law enforcement staff and county employees. They recommended CCS, a behavioral health provider based in Heppner that serves Morrow, Gilliam, Grant and Wheeler counties, over Lifeways, an Ontario-based mental health provider that has served the county for 14 years and operates in Eastern Oregon and Idaho.

"It's an incredible opportunity, to work in Umatilla County, to work with the customers that we will serve and the community partners and the commissioners," said Kimberly Lindsay, executive director for CCS, which employs roughly 200 people. "But it's not without risk."

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INSIDE • CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2021



EO SPOTLIGHT

Schools contend with increase in student COVID-19 cases

By JADE MCDOWELL AND ANTONIO SIERRA East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — As schools have returned to in-person classes in the spring, the Oregon Health Authority has started to record small outbreaks of COVID-19 among students across Umatilla County.

According to the state's weekly outbreak report, schools have reported 66 student cases in Umatilla County since the beginning of April, the first full month most county schools began offering in-person classes again. More than two-thirds of those cases have originated from the Pendleton and Hermiston school districts.

Instead of a large outbreak, schools are seeing smaller pockets of infection at various schools. Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said the county is tracing many of these cases to extracurricular activities rather than broad, in-school spread.

Still, the number of students with confirmed cases of COVID-19 is continuing to grow: OHA reported 19 new student cases this week alone.

The state isn't forcing schools to close their entire building after a confirmed case, but it still has an effect on student education.

"If we have to quarantine people because they haven't either been vaccinated or they've contracted the virus, it's probably going to impact their learning," said Pendleton School District Superintendent Chris Fritsch. "I don't see any



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Umatilla County Public Health Department nurse Heather Griggs prepares to administer a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to Armand Larive Middle School teacher Greg Hamm at a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Hermiston High School on Jan. 29, 2021. School teachers who have been vaccinated do not have to quarantine if a student in their classroom tests positive.



Fiumara



Fritsch



Mooney



Sipe

way around that and I don't know that, in any future guidance, I don't think it's much of a stretch that we're going to have to exclude people that are sick from school."

According to OHA, Pendleton

has reported 21 student cases since April, with all of its schools, excepting Hawthorne Alternative High School, reporting at least one case in May.

At other Umatilla County school

districts, superintendents are insistent the cases aren't evidence of school spread.

State reports show a total of 21 students in the Hermiston School District tested positive for COVID-19, spread across six of its schools. Superintendent Tricia Mooney said based on the limited information the county health department gives the school district, it appears the virus isn't spreading through classrooms once one student falls ill.

See Schools, Page A8

PHS grad plots path to success

By ANTONIO SIERRA East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The ink hasn't yet dried on Johann Valera-Vega's diploma, but his teachers at Pendleton High School were confident about his trajectory.

"He's going to make it," music teacher Andy Cary said.

Science teacher Jess Cooper, who had Valera-Vega in one of his physics classes, was similarly effusive.

"He's going to have success wherever he ends up," he said.

The Pendleton High School senior now is planning a move to Arizona to pursue a career in neuroscience, but the public education system didn't always have the same faith in his ability as it does today.

Born and raised in Pendleton, Valera-Vega attends church at Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día Hispana de Pendleton, a Spanish-language Seventh-day Adventist church. It

CALLING IT A CAREER

See graduation photos from Weston-McEwen and Hawthorne high schools. Page B2

was through church he became connected with Harris Junior Academy, a private school also affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventists.

Valera-Vega was enrolled at Harris for his elementary school years, but by the time he was ready to enter middle school, he was ready for a new challenge. He transferred to Sunridge Middle School, where he was forced to start at square one.

Valera-Vega said Sunridge didn't account for the education he received at Harris, meaning the staff placed him in remedial courses for math and English. The placements frustrated him, but he was undeterred in prov-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Graduating Pendleton High School senior Johann Valera-Vega poses for a portrait Wednesday, May 27, 2021, in the music room at the school. Valera-Vega plans to move to Arizona and pursue a career in neuroscience.

ing that he deserved more advanced classes.

"I just showed it in my work," he said.

Valera-Vega soon was moved out of those classes and developed a strong academic record, an ability he continued to demonstrate during his high school years.

But the classroom isn't the only place where he's shown promise.

Valera-Vega said he grew up play-

ing the piano, but his horizons really expanded when David Payne, the late Sunridge music teacher, convinced him to take up the trumpet.

"I realized that was the instrument for me," he said. "I stuck with it."

He continued to play the trumpet through high school, not just performing in school but also as a

See Grad, Page A8

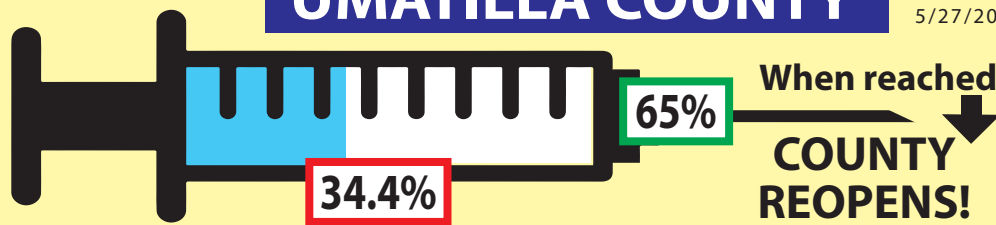
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UMATILLA COUNTY

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