

## Health:

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Lifeways plans to protest the county's decision, according to Liz Johnsen, chief operating officer for Lifeways. She said Lifeways has concerns over the decision, but declined to say what those concerns are.

### Merging services

The county's own alcohol and drug treatment services cover substance abuse, while Lifeways handled mental health care for the county. But patients in crisis often fall under both categories at once, officials say, at times leaving it unclear which entity should respond to someone in need.

"What you see is two (community mental health providers) pointing their finger at the other one," Shafer said.

Community Counseling Solutions is going to handle both.

"For us, the bar is high," said Lindsay. "We put a lot of thought into it before we decided to respond to the (request for proposal) because if we're going to do something, we have to do it very well or die trying."

An independent consultant determined the county would be better served with a single entity covering both services. That prompted the county to put out a request for proposals for a community mental health provider to combine these services under one umbrella, said Shafer, who was one of the five people on the committee that recommended CCS over Lifeways.

Mark Royal, the interim director of Umatilla County Health and Human Services, said he felt confident in the county's decision to go with CCS as its new provider. He said the proposal held strong indications that Community Counseling wanted to work well with the county as a partner, saying "that was the most important piece."

Lifeways employs more than 120 people in Umatilla County, most of whom are county residents, Johnsen said. She said this transition will "have a huge impact on them" and that "their lives are in flux because of this decision."

### Transition concerns

Johnsen described the county's decision as a "pretty large blow to a workforce that

loves their work and really are experts in their field."

"It's a difficult thing to think about," she said. "It's not just employees to think about. It's families."

Shafer said he expects "a lot of Lifeways personnel becoming employees with CCS."

Lindsay said she has reached out to Lifeways to begin the transition process. She added she "feels very badly" about the "awkward and probably stressful state" for the Lifeways employees.

"I was told once to make very few promises but to keep every promise that you make," she said. "So I'm not going to promise that this is going to be the best job of their life, or that it's all going to be oatmeal and honey. But what I can say is that most of the people who

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— Kimberly Lindsay,  
executive director for CCS

work for CCS enjoy their jobs."

The decision comes just weeks after Lifeways reopened the former Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital in Hermiston as a secure residential treatment facility on May 4. The facility, which served patients in need of acute psychiatric care, closed in early April due to staffing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, after being open for just seven months.

Johnsen could not comment about what Lifeways plans to do with its county facilities. She also said the transition for patients at Lifeways will be "quite a change," but refrained from commenting on specifics.

"Our goal is to make sure that whatever transition occurs, to have them at the forefront and their needs at the forefront," Johnsen said of Lifeways patients.

Lindsay recognized the transition will have its inherent challenges for patients.

"There will be some people that it's going to be uncomfortable for," she said. "There's going to be some people that

are not going to like it, even though their counselor might remain the same. We just need to provide as many reassurances as we can. You lose people when you make promises that you cannot keep and you operate without integrity."

Shafer said he doesn't anticipate there being any problem for the transition for patients between the two providers. He added that officials with Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. and the Oregon Health Authority have offered to assist in the transition.

"The last thing we want to do is to upset anyone who's in treatment for addiction or mental health or whatever," Shafer said. "We don't want to interrupt their treatment. We want it to be smooth and as seamless as possible for them."

### Reliability matters

Shafer, who worked for the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office for 18 years, said he was more confident in the ability of CCS to respond quickly and consistently to people in crisis than Lifeways.

"Their philosophy is, when somebody is in crisis and law enforcement calls them, they go, period, no questions asked," Shafer said.

"CCS shows up," Lindsay said. "So if law enforcement is out on the scene, and they want us to come, we come. That's the bottom line."

He said too often Lifeways' response to law enforcement requests for help required prolonged questioning that sometimes ended in Lifeways declining to send help entirely.

"Meanwhile, now the law enforcement officer is stuck dealing with someone who is in crisis and needs help," Shafer said. "And law enforcement officers are not equipped to deal with that."

Shafer said CCS will take over addiction services in the county in September and mental health services sometime around December.

"It will be a slow transition for them to get up to speed," Shafer said.

Lindsay said she is looking forward to building a relationship with the county, holding and attending meetings and getting to know community partners. However, she said the task before CCS is daunting.

"The bar is high," she said, "which means the fall is great."

## Schools:

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"I think our precautions and safety measures are working, definitely," she said.

### Vaccinations helping

Teachers who are vaccinated don't have to quarantine if a student in their classroom tests positive, so Mooney said it has been helpful that as more staff have gotten vaccinated, there have been fewer instances of teachers needing to quarantine. She said the district doesn't know the vaccination status of all its staff and students, but in accordance with OHA guidelines, if a staff member presents proof of vaccination to the district they are able to go without a mask in settings where students are not present, such as meetings with other staff.

Umatilla Superintendent Heidi Sipe echoed Mooney's comments.

According to OHA data, Umatilla School District has had a total of 10 students test positive for COVID-19 between its three schools, with the latest cases attributed to May 11 at McNary Heights Elementary School and Umatilla High School. Sipe said cases reported have so far appeared to come from exposures students had outside the classroom, and have not spread to the rest of the students' classmates. That's an indicator masks, social distancing and other safety measures are working, she said.

"To our knowledge we still haven't had any school transmission," she said.

### Schools want clarity

One thing the district has run into is sibling groups getting sick at home, caus-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**Students settle into Michael Bittorf's Advanced Placement English class at Pendleton High School on March 31, 2021. Students and staff in the spring had to learn to navigate COVID-19 outbreaks and vaccinations.**

ing, in one case, about 100 students to be quarantined across all three of the district's schools.

Sipe said when a student tests positive for COVID-19 and the school is notified, the school then submits a list of the student's classes, the seating chart for those classes, the attendance record of the students in those classes and their contact information to Umatilla County Public Health. The health department then makes a determination of which students need to quarantine and contacts those students directly.

The result is the district does not know who was asked to quarantine unless the parents or students let them know. The district asks for students to show the letter from the health department to be excused for their absence, so students can't claim to be quarantining when they're really just skipping school. But Sipe said she is concerned there could be students the health department asked to quarantine but showed up at school anyway.

She said it has been frustrating that in some cases people have made false statements on social media about COVID-19 cases at the schools, but she has been

unable to correct the record because she does not want to share personal medical information about a staff member or student. She encouraged parents to contact their child's school directly if they have questions.

Fritsch, the Pendleton superintendent, compared making decisions on COVID-19 issues like being a referee at a football game: Half of the audience is going to cheer the decision while the other half will disapprove of it.

Heading into next year, Fritsch said he hopes the state will make some changes to its COVID-19 rules so they better align with each other. For instance, the school social distancing standard is 3 feet, but whenever there is a suspected exposure, the county is required to contact trace all children within 6 feet of the potential exposure.

While the Oregon Department of Education has yet to publicly release its COVID-19 guidance for next year, Fritsch said he expects it to more closely align with the recommendations made by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Reporter Bryce Dole contributed to this feature.

## Grad:

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member of the school's jazz band and with the A Sharp Players, a preparatory orchestra with the Oregon East Symphony.

What stood out more to Cary than Valera-Vega's musical aptitude was his character and drive, marking Valera-Vega as a leader in the jazz band.

In addition to the piano and trumpet, Valera-Vega also knows how to play the violin and is learning guitar in his free time. With his family originating from Venezuela and Chile, he's even experimented with Latin American instruments, such as the charango and the cuatro.

One of Valera-Vega's other great passions lies on the pitch.

"I've had a ball at my feet since before I could walk," he said. "Soccer has been a really big part of my life. It's definitely been like therapy for me, and when I'm going through tough times ... soccer has been there for me to release my stress."

Valera-Vega has been on the varsity soccer team since his freshman year, but the COVID-19 pandemic threw off his senior year. The state eventually offered high schoolers a truncated season, but Pendleton's season became even shorter when a COVID-19 exposure caused the team to miss several games as the whole team quarantined.

Valera-Vega said it was a challenging year for the team, but he still felt like Bucks worked hard to compete with some of the top teams in the league.

Spending most of the year taking classes from home gave

him more time to think about his future, solidifying the path he's set out for himself.

Despite receiving some attractive financial aid offers from in-state schools, Valera-Vega is committed to attending Arizona State University. He said he has some familiarity with the university through his cousin, who attended school there. His cousin gave him an informal tour of campus once, where Valera-Vega was introduced to one of the less savory aspects of campus life.


"It was kind of funny because I think they had a party the night before," he said. "There were tables flipped over, red Solo cups thrown all over the floor and weird stains on the wall. A microwave, just like hanging out, on the floor. It was pretty interesting to see."

But Valera-Vega's primary motivator for selecting Arizona State was its neuroscience program. He wants to become a doctor who specializes in treating brains, and the university's neuroscience program sold him on moving more than 1,000 miles away from home.

Once he completes his bachelor's degree, Valera-Vega plans on returning to his home state to enroll at Oregon Health & Science University for medical school. And to pay for medical school, he intends to join the Portland university's Scholars for a Healthy Oregon Initiative, a program that pays for a student's tuition in exchange for working in a rural or underserved community after graduation.

As he readies himself to move to Tempe, Arizona, Valera-Vega said it will be tough to leave his family and friends behind in Pendleton. But he plans to keep them in mind as he ventures forward

on a path toward success many people at Pendleton High School feel is already there for the taking.



## "Scramble for Scholarships"

### Friday, June 11th


..... 1pm Shotgun Start .....

### Big River Golf Course - Umatilla

Golfers of all skill levels are invited to participate in the 28th annual "Scramble for Scholarships" golf tournament. Four person teams can sign up together or individual pairings can be made by the tournament committee. Your \$70 entry fee covers green fees, a box lunch, and makes a charitable donation to the foundation to use in awarding scholarships to local medical students.

Register at [gscfscramble.eventbrite.com](https://gscfscramble.eventbrite.com) or call 541-667-3405. Entry deadline is June 9th.

Great prize holes and Hole-in-one on #1 & #9  
WINS \$25,000 towards a new car sponsored by  
**ROGERS TOYOTA of HERMISTON**



# 2021 BUTTE CHALLENGE

## 5K RUN, 5K WALK AND 10K RUN

### Saturday, June 5th 8:30am

All races begin and end at Butte Park

## DOOR PRIZES!

## FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!

Online registration and race information can be found at [www.ButteChallenge.com](http://www.ButteChallenge.com) Register online by May 22nd to order a custom technical race T-Shirt.

Free kids race for youth 10 and under @ 8 AM (no registration)

All proceeds benefit the Hermiston Cross Country Program



Thank you for your support!