



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**A line of roughly 100 cars Jan. 28, 2021, snakes through the Pendleton Convention Center parking lot as Umatilla County began vaccinating educators with a drive-thru clinic. The deadline for teachers, health care workers and others to get vaccinations or show proof of exemptions is Oct. 18.**

## Teachers:

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When it comes to evaluating religious exemption requests, the district can go as far as ask employees for religious materials or a statement from a religious leader to explain why they need an exemption. While the district has sometimes asked staff to clarify their request, Fritsch said the district hasn't tried to determine what is and isn't a sincerely held religious belief.

"We didn't go in-depth," he said. "We didn't question that."

Unvaccinated staff that have an exemption not only are still required to wear a mask while working at

school, but will need to wear a district-issued KN-95 mask instead of a mask brought from home. Fritsch said the district will not require unvaccinated staff to get tested every week.

While the district's Oct. 5 report didn't include school volunteers, the state also requires they get vaccinated. Unlike paid staff, Fritsch said they will not be granted any exemptions to getting the vaccine.

Ultimately, three staff — one certified and two classified — chose to resign rather than get vaccinated. In the most recent case, Fritsch said the employee tried to secure a medical exemption, but when their doctor wouldn't sign off on it, they submitted their resignation instead.



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**Doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine await injection Jan. 28, 2021, during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic for educators at the Pendleton Convention Center. The Pendleton School District on Tuesday, Oct. 5, reported 87.5% of district employees are fully vaccinated or will be by Oct. 18, the deadline Gov. Kate Brown set for educators, health care workers and others to get vaccinated or get exemptions.**



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**The new Oregon Washington Health Network COPES – Community Outreach Prevention Engagement Services – clinic in Pendleton is one of three new clinics in the county to offer support and guidance from peers.**

## Centers:

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Bernard credited his recovery to Narcotics Anonymous, The Powerhouse Residential Drug Treatment Center in Hermiston and those who helped him work through the personal roots of his addiction.

Bernard said it's his experiences with overcoming homelessness, jail and addiction that help him in relating to his clients and working with them. He said many of the things he has now — a wife, children and a home — he never would have been able to envision for himself.

"All of those things that I thought were going to be out of reach, all of those things I got the chance to experience," he said of his life now.

Amy Ashton-Williams, Oregon Washington Health Network's executive director, was present at the Hermiston grand opening, which also included Hermiston city officials, OWWhN employees and interested health care workers.

"I think this is monumental," Ashton-Williams said, also explaining the centers will be able to offer help, untied to treatment. Services are free, and a good place for people who are troubled and

unaware of what to do next.

Ashton-Williams said the organization have helped around 50 people in the past few months. The offices, with more peers, she said, will be able to serve even more people.

Hermiston City Councilors Jackie Myers and Doug Primmer joined Ashton-Williams for the ribbon cutting.

"We are very excited for this," Myers said. "This absolutely fills a need that Hermiston has far gone without. Having someone here for those in need and their families is a great service."

Primmer added, based on his experience in law enforcement, he has seen the damage drugs have had on people's lives.

"Having access to this type of thing, this network, is going to help us out," he said, because the centers provide police a resource to direct people to.

Stanfield resident Luis Ibarra is the peer mentor supervisor for all three centers and oversees local operations. He trains peers and makes sure clients have a positive experience.

As the child of an alcoholic, he said he has a strong feeling for his work. He witnessed domestic violence in his home and abuse. This made him angry and bitter,

leading to rebellion and dropping out of high school.

Even when his home life improved, he said he still had anger issues in need of rehabilitation. Now, he intends to help other people with similar problems.

Megan Torres, another peer supervisor, also is working with the centers, going from one to the other, as well as local hospitals. She will direct people with substance use disorder to the peer centers.

She said she is happy with the new centers and grateful for the opportunity to work with OWWhN, as she is trying to reduce emergency department visits by redirecting people to the peer centers, where they are more properly served.

Shannon Carslay, recovery mentor, works out of the Pendleton center. In the past month, working in Pendleton, he has been able to help people by relating to addicted individuals. By sharing his own story, he gets them to open up about their situations. Then, he finds help for them.

"I've been through a lot of what our clients have been through," he said. And he offers emotional support, while also directing clients to medical, psychological and even financial aid.

Valentin Palomares,

recovery mentor, is working out of the Milton-Freewater center. He has spent the past month in training, studying to become certified and then shadowing other mentors.

"I'm really excited about this," Palomares said. "I, myself, have not only dealt with drug and alcohol, but with other issues."

He said he thinks people like him have been neglected, "not by the city, but by the culture." He said Hispanic people find it difficult to ask for help and he hopes, as a Hispanic man, he can bring services to others without compromising their place in their culture.

Another peer mentor, Mariah Wright, also shares her experiences to help other struggling addicts. She said she is a recovering addict and has been "in and out of addiction for 10 years." She was homeless for five years. For three of those years, she was homeless with her daughter.

"It was really hard," she said. "For the longest time, I couldn't put anything before the drugs. I always put the drugs first. So I understand the trouble; I understand how hard the drugs can be."

Wright went to prison, and that is where she changed her life. Released from prison, she is now

## Chaplain:

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She listens in the hallways and at the nurses stations as the staff relate the stress of their job. She said health care workers can often be reluctant to seek help themselves, so she enjoys finding them and giving them an opportunity to talk, even if all they utter are sarcastic remarks:

"I had one girl tell me, 'It's going to suck for a while, and then it's going to get better,'" she said. "It's an acknowledgment that we're just working through this and doing the best we can do, one patient at a time, one day at a time."

She called her job a privilege, but one that comes with responsibility.

"The notion of saying something wrong and making something worse is terrifying," she said. "But it is an incredible privilege to help bring a bit of balance and healing into their life."

She joined the hospital as an on-call chaplain in 2019. A math teacher at Blue Mountain Community College, she felt compelled to help health care workers through their day-to-day work while hearing stories from her husband, an emergency department nurse at St. Anthony. Now, she works evenings and weekends.

"I'm not somebody who likes to be bored," she said.

Throughout the pandemic, she has stood by as infection has ebbed and flowed. She has listened to health care workers whose patients improve and decline over weeks of treatment, and always in isolation, away from their families.

She told of a nurse whose patient had to go on comfort care, a stage where a nurse helps soothe a patient at the end of their life. The nurse had given the last dose of medication, and she came to Hardin struggling to cope.

"She had almost felt like she had killed the patient," she said. "So I suggested to her that, rather than think of it that way, she should think of it as giving the gift of a peaceful passing."

And over the past two months, the staff have only grown more tired and anxious, she said.

"The energy level has dropped," she said. "People are tired. They're feeling stressed and there's a lot of worry right now because of impending staff losses and no impending decrease in patients."

The hospital, already short staffed, could lose many of its workers in the coming weeks when the state's vaccine mandate goes into effect, forcing health care workers to get the shot or lose their jobs. That impending reality has sown a new kind of division, Hardin said, between unvaccinated employees worried about finding new work and vaccinated employees fearing what work will be like without them.

The mandate comes as Umatilla County reported weekly case counts exceeding 350 for the 11th straight week, making the delta crisis the largest the county has faced by far. And a recent spike, driven partly by an outbreak linked to the Pendleton Round-Up, means the hospital could see yet another surge in patients.

"There's some uncertainty, which leads to worry and concern," Hardin said.

But for Hardin, she knows there's only one thing a chaplain can do.

"We try to pass it on to God," she said. "We're chaplains. We try to pass those things on along to that higher power that can maybe do something, or at least take that burden so that we don't have to carry it."

### COPES LOCATIONS AND HOURS OF OPERATION

The Hermiston center is at 165 S.W. Third St., Hermiston. The Pendleton center is at 200 S.E. Hailey Ave., Suite 105/106, Pendleton.

The Milton-Freewater center is at 410 N. Main St., Milton-Freewater.

The hours of operation for the Hermiston and Milton-Freewater centers are Monday to Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Pendleton center is open Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. People may walk in and receive help during these hours for free and without notice. Once the centers become more established, hours will be extended, managers said.

dedicated to helping others in Umatilla County.

"This is a passion for me," she said. "I want people to get the experience with recovery that I have."

She is the niece of East Oregonian news editor Phil Wright.

Kori Hibbard, a home visiting nurse with the Umatilla County Nurse-Family Partnership program, also attended the event.

"I feel this is going to be a great resource for the clients I serve," she said. "I serve first-time moms and their babies, and I'm with them until their baby turns two. Some of my moms struggle with addiction and have a history of addiction."

*East Oregonian reporter Ben Lonergan contributed to this feature.*

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