

Violence:

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“It’s going to take a while before people realize this exists,” said Althea Wolf, a survivor who spoke at the event. Wolf, who helped conduct the survey, works for the tribes’ First Foods Policy program.

Wolf said she was glad to see people speaking about their personal experiences at the casino, but noted that the turnout was small compared to events about things like substance abuse. To her, that shows a continued unwillingness for people to confront the violence against Native American women long plagued tribal land — what she called a “foundation of distrust.”

“It feels like we’re stuck as a community,” Wolf said.

But Wolf said the words of women coming forward about their own experiences, including those in her own family, empower her. She nodded to Coyote as an inspiration.

“Their legacies are a source of strength for me,” she said.

‘I need help’

A growing body of research shows Native American women are disproportionately victims of violence. Nearly half of all Native American women have suffered physical or sexual violence, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But those totals remain rough estimates. Data about violence on tribal land went unreported for decades due to layers of bureaucratic and jurisdictional problems, including disagreements among local or federal agencies concerning who should investigate. And what data is available today remains limited. Indigenous advo-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Desiree Coyote, an abuse survivor, advocate and enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, speaks during an event recapping the results of a year-and-a-half long study into violence on the reservation near Pendleton. Coyote, who manages the tribe’s Family Violence Services program, spearheaded the project.

WHO TO CALL

If you are a victim of intimate partner violence, intimidation, sexual violence, rape, elder abuse, teen dating violence or stalking, you can reach Family Violence Service’s 24-hour hotline at 541-240-4171.

cates say the actual rates of violence are likely be much higher.

Before 2014, when the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation became one of the first tribes to begin prosecuting non-Indians for domestic violence against Native Americans on the reservation, many non-Native perpetrators could commit acts of violence on the reservation and walk free, volunteers and advocates said.

Several Native American women at the event said they became involved in domestic and sexual violence services because of their own lived experiences and the experiences of their loved ones.

“I’m grateful,” Eugena Stacona, a survivor and former assistant director of education for the tribes, said

of the event. “Maybe now, more people will come and say, ‘I need help’ ... Even though it’s hard.”

Growing up in a housing project on the reservation, she remembered when there was no domestic violence safe house nearby. She also worked at the Mission Market, where she’d see countless women with bruises on their faces. Some wore sunglasses to cover up the abuse, she said.

“There wasn’t anywhere for them to go,” said Stacona, who, at 56, learned on the morning of the event that she had earned her doctorate from Capella University.

Stacona said the region needs more shelters for domestic violence victims. She said workplaces, and law enforcement in particular, need increased empa-

thy training when it comes to dealing with victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Extending a hand

The day concluded with conversations about healing from trauma, remarks from tribal leader Leo Stewart that brought tears to the eyes of attendees, and a closing prayer and song.

“It’s our story,” Stewart said from the front of the room.

“We like to sit in a corner and not share a story that might help somebody else,” he said, adding, “What we can do today is teach our loved ones ... It’s just extending a hand.”

Wolf badgered her kids for weeks to attend the event, so they would hear the stories of people like her. She even contacted their school to ask if they could miss a day. As they walked into the room on Nov. 19, they noticed the writing posted to the wall.

“That’s our community talking to us,” Wolf said to them.

They were silent.

Safe place:

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rooms, describing the facility. On the tour, she dispelled misconceptions people might have about the place.

When people think of shelters, she said, they often think of one room dormitories with bunk beds, all lined up next to one another. While such shelters do exist and meet a need, this is not Martha’s House. Instead, Martha’s House more closely resembles an apartment building. Families, as she pointed out, have their own, private rooms.

There also are communal rooms, including a business center, a kitchen and a living room.

Galan, who has held the position since September 2020, has been with the organization for three years. She said she is often surprised when she meets people who do not know about Martha’s House; even new applicants are often surprised about the resource. As the only paid employee of the house, she mentors the people she refers to as “friendship families” and directs them to other community resources.

Building stability

Seven families, a total of 13 residents, now reside at Martha’s House, Galan said. Many of these people have relocated to Martha’s House to “cut old ties,” she said. They are trying to remove themselves from the situations, and sometimes the people, who were part of old problems, she said. Often strangers to the community, they need to become familiar with basics such as the location of stores and the post office, while they also find jobs, save money and find new residences.

Also, they are looking for loving support, which is available through volunteers, Galan said. One such volunteer was Rebecca Lafolette, committee member and mentor, who said she has been at Martha’s House for three years. During this time, she explained, she has met with people who have accom-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

House manager Julia Galan, center, leads a tour of Martha’s House Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021, in Hermiston.

plished goals that included obtaining a GED and seeing a doctor.

“People have their struggles,” Lafolette said, adding it is helpful for people to have stable places to live while making new goals to better their lives.

Lafolette was speaking the truth, according to Angela Pursel, president of Eastern Oregon Mission and a Martha’s House board member.

Pursel recalled a woman arrived at the house with two children and “a big heart.” She found her safe place in Martha’s House, and did all the right things. She sought resources, got a job, earned promotions, Pursel said, and after six months left Martha’s House, having focused on her children and their needs and having found housing.

Now, the mom and her children are doing well.

Such examples are common, she said, and other people agree with her. In the two years he has been volunteering at Martha’s House, Daniel Wattenburger also has seen success stories. As a committee member oversee-

ing Martha’s House, he said he witnessed people transitioning from living in cars or on other people’s couches to having their own places.

Wattenburger has face-to-face experience with such people, including a single dad who he mentored. The man, Wattenburger said, has four children and just needed space to be with them and find the right path in life. Through Martha’s House, he was able to find work, build up savings and find a new place.

Home to more than 200 since the start

Not everyone is ready for this transition, according to volunteers, which is why, they said, Martha’s House often operates at half occupancy. Of the 18 studios, seven are available. House manager Galan stressed the house has rules, including no drugs and alcohol. Smoking also is forbidden, according to a list of tenant policies on Martha’s House website, www.marthashousehermiston.org.

Some people don’t agree with the rules, or background

check and drug test which are performed, Galan said.

“If they are ready to move forward with their lives, we are here to give them the assistance that they need,” said Cathy Putnam, committee member and former interim Martha’s House director.

She added the house has provided a home to more than 200 people since it was founded in 2013.

Putnam said she understands the reasons for the vacancies, explaining that “not everyone is ready for a hand up” and some people are not yet willing to change. People, she said, need to be ready to change their lives. They also must be willing to accept structure, she said.

She recommends volunteering to other people, as does Sharon Waldern, lead mentor at Martha’s House. A retired nurse, she started helping out with the shelter through her hospital contacts. As a mentor to the other mentors, she said she has seen this work change the lives of volunteers as well as the house residents.

It gives people a good feeling, she said, to help others.

Village:

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program, which evolved during the past eight years and was modeled loosely after existing wraparound programs in other places, hired its first care coordinator, Doherty, in 2013. Now there are seven. Joining them are six in-school mental health counselors, nurses in each community, a visiting dental hygienist, school resource officers, a self-sufficiency coach, behavior room teacher, a STEM teacher, a workforce coordinator and early childhood employees spread around the communities of Heppner, Irrigon and Boardman. Eighteen partners, from health, law enforcement, colleges, government, the InterMountain Education Service District and the Port of Morrow, together spend a little more than \$1 for each the district spends.

The counselors, nurses and care coordinators focus on helping students deal with challenges of the pandemic, poverty or other situations affecting well-being.

“Without the wrap-around program, we would basically be in a panic,” Dirksen said. “I feel fortunate we had this program so well established before COVID — there are a lot of school districts that have tried to add all of these programs but didn’t have any relationship with their partners yet. It doesn’t happen overnight.”

George, the counselor in Heppner, has noticed more students with anxiety. Some have expressed suicidal thoughts. Many felt out of rhythm after bouncing back to in-person school from isolation.

“It’s stressful,” she said. “It’s learning how to navigate again.”

Dave Norton, principal of Riverside High School in Boardman, said many students struggled to stay engaged with school during remote learning. Some, he said, thought about quitting school to work.

“It took everybody, it took myself, our care coordinator, our Community Counseling Solutions counselor, our school resource officer and our regular school counselor to reach those kids,” Norton said. “We did a ton of home visits between all of our team and just worked with those kids to really sell them on why do they need to finish school.”

All were convinced to give school another shot.

Ryan Keefeauver, principal of Irrigon High School, described similar efforts to reengage students. When a family or student seemed to fall off the radar, a team that included the assistant principal, care coordinator and the school resource

officer made a home visit to find out what kind of roadblocks the student was having. Many lacked access to the internet.

“We were able to provide hot spot internet service to our students who didn’t have it at their home,” Keffhauer said. “We set up large band hot spots for a couple of RV parks where a lot of our students live so multiple students could use them at one time.”

Drury got technical support at his grandparents’ home in Boardman, where he stayed during remote learning.

“For some reason I had the most technical problems of my whole class,” he said with a laugh. “I’m like an 87-year-old man in an 18-year-old’s body as far as technology.”

Meeting needs a must

Doherty smiled as she listened to the teen. She is passionate about this program and how it impacts students such as Drury.

“We know that the social, emotional, physical health of our students directly impacts their academic performance,” she said. “So when students don’t know where their next meal is coming from or where they’re going to sleep tomorrow or they don’t have clean clothes to wear to school or they have a toothache and can’t get to the dentist or don’t have health insurance, we know those kind of stress factors impact their ability to concentrate, their ability to be dependable and be here. Because they’re worried about surviving, they’re not worried about being at school.”

“Education is important,” George said, “but taking care of students’ needs, making sure they have a home, they’re safe, they’re fed, that’s important too.”

These days, you’ll find Drury at school or on weekends at the Gateway Cafe grilling burgers or assembling chicken Alfredo, teriyaki bowls or shrimp fried rice. Drury, who plans on a career in the culinary arts, credited the wraparound program for hoisting him out of his dire situation and letting him focus on his future.

“For a while, it was really the only thing moving me in a positive direction along with my grandparents,” he said.

Those assisting in the teen’s life marvel at his tenacity.

“As much as he’s experienced in his young life, he keeps moving forward,” said Drury’s in-school counselor, Amy George. “Yes, Peggy and I have been here to support him, but there’s a lot that we haven’t had to do. He takes it and goes with it.”

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