

NEON quietly promotes better health in area

By Rocky Wilson
Wallowa County Chieftain

That few people in Wallowa County know what the acronym NEON stands for likely is of little concern to the seven employees of that grant-funded nonprofit organization based in La Grande. That's because many people working closely in the intertwined fields of health and social services, the core of Northeast Oregon Network's (NEON) mission, care more about positive health outcomes than they do organizational recognition.

Through NEON's involvement, a minimum of \$134,631 in services are budgeted for projects in Wallowa County during the current fiscal year. In operation since 2004, NEON directly impacts the lives of many people in Wallowa County to little fanfare.

One primary reason for that, says NEON Network Development Coordinator Pepper McColgan, is because many programs in this county are accomplished in collaborative partnerships with such bodies as Winding Waters Clinic, Community Connection, Wallowa Valley Center for Wellness, Building Healthy Families, and Head Start.

Lisa Ladendorff, executive director of NEON and one of four state-registered community health workers on staff, is the grant writer mostly responsible for pulling \$828,000 in grant money to support NEON's budget. From that total, says Ladendorff, \$240,277 goes directly to collaborative partners in Wallowa, Union, and Baker counties.

And it's from the remaining less-than-\$600,000 that Wallowa County's budget is being drawn.

By crunching numbers, Ladendorff is able to isolate Wallowa County's program participants ("community members") from those from other member counties. In the first year of the Patient Activation Project where NEON obtained that grant and Winding Waters Clinic plus Wallowa Valley Center for Wellness helped administer it, 162 individuals participated from Wallowa County in a project targeted to people suffering from diabetes, hypertension, and/or obesity. Another 66 locals were served in a health coverage and enrollment program.

McColgan stresses NEON's goals of education and empowerment, pointing to a huge push on a

community health worker training program. By the end of 2014, it had trained a total of 63 workers over the course of the previous 18 months — training workers beyond the tri-county area in Malheur and Umatilla counties as well. Thirteen of that total of 63 were new community health workers in Wallowa County.

Providing a niche need to promote employment and better connect health services with those in need of such services, the health care workers being instructed by McColgan, Ladendorff, and Vixen Radford are not direct medical personnel, yet are trained to make in-home visits, connect persons with social services, and provide some educational assistance.

One near constant among NEON's many projects, whether accomplished via collaboration or any other means is that participating community members will not be billed.

A popular NEON program that's impacted more than 600 county residents, mostly parents, in the past two years, says Ladendorff, is the What to Do for Health Book Program, an instructional resource designed to speed contact with appropriate health providers.

And new programs are being introduced on a regular basis.

Within the past year alone, says McColgan, new classes have been introduced in tai chi and diabetes self-management.

Another recently introduced program is called Pathways Community Hub. With collaborative partners outnumbering community members 4-3 at this time, the purpose here is better to address the high-risk, high-cost needs of persons with chronic diseases.



Pepper McColgan