HOSPITAL

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gotten to where the level of care expected is more than the reimbursement, and that always creates a problem."

The hospital has determined it can't afford to run the facility on its own. The hospital underwrites losses so the management company can at least break even. In the last six months, the hospital has written checks to the tune of $231,000 to keep the doors open.

"It's a serious liability to the hospital," Davy said.

He added that the biggest challenge is that with healthcare going toward reimbursement and a myriad of changes coming in the future, he doesn't want the center to financially weaken the hospital to the point that it's unable to serve the community to the level it deserves.

Since the hospital is a Critical Access Hospital, which is a designation given to some rural hospitals by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the hospital can't provide center management.

Lunde also said that 70 percent of the center residents are on Medicare and Medicaid, which has caps on the fees, while private pay offers much higher fees, something many private management companies are considering.

"As a public entity, we can't do that. It's not ethical," he said.

Lunde said the hospital is the board's highest priority because as the hospital goes, so goes the community.

"We're the largest employer. You lose your hospital, you lose your doctors," he said. "It's a cascading effect of collapse in a community, and there's example after example of that happening out there."

DRUGS

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"The problem with pushing boundaries in this day and age is that it will get you dead — one time," he said.

Much of the meth manufacturing in the state went south when the drug ephedrine, a common ingredient in both cold and allergy medicine was banned from over-the-counter sales. Mexico picked up the slack, and Rogers estimates nearly all the meth today is manufactured in Mexico.

"They stepped in to fill the void, and they've been doing an outstanding job at it," Rogers said.

It's also a matter of convenience for drug pushers.

"It takes a lot of ephedrine to make a little bit of meth," Fish added.

Williams also said she's seeing more people using marijuana. Particularly troubling for all three is the use and manufacture of butane hash oil, also called "honey oil," which is much more refined than the hashish of old.

The process involves stripping THC, the psychoactive substance contained in the plant, and refining it into its purest form.

Rogers added that the commercial marijuana of today is likely 10 times more powerful than the marijuana of the '70s. The legalization of marijuana, which no one in law enforcement leadership in the county approves of, has brought its own set of problems.

Williams said the county has already seized five BHO labs just since the legalization of marijuana.

"It's a real danger to the community," Williams said. "The five we've found are just the tip of the iceberg. They're so easy to make, and the butane makes it highly volatile. They heat it up, and it explodes."

One lab was found in a car with a child inside.

Chief Fish said that people have learned to put BHO in their e-cigarettes, where it is virtually undetectable by smell although it is by testing. Williams said that a high proportion of meth cases also have marijuana involved.

There is also agreement that drugs exacerbate other crimes in the county.

"This stuff is expensive, so people without money have to do something to get more money," Rogers said. The drug trade mostly perpetuates property crimes.

"If we've got an assault or other violent crimes, meth is often involved," Williams said. "With domestic violence cases, we see alcohol and methamphetamine involved. It's kind of a part of everything."

Fish said children of parents who use meth are also affected negatively. Williams remembered a recent case where a mother and son smoked meth together.

"It's generational," she said.

The Street Crime Team, made up of all three branches of law enforcement in the county, is a proactive response, but much of the work on drug crimes is reactive because of the limited resources, including manpower.

"That's one of the most frustrating things for me," Williams said. "Is that what we can actually do is reactive. We can educate, and go into schools, but when it comes to what we can actually do, we have to have a crime first."

Fentanyl and fentanyl related compounds such as carfentanil and acetyl fentanyl are synthetic opioids. Drugs in this group have varying but often very high levels of potency. In recent years they have become more widely available in the United States and grown as a threat to public safety.

SOURCE: DEA

> *"IT'S GOING TO BE HARDER TO GET PEOPLE INTO TREATMENT NOW THAT POSSESSION OF A CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE IS JUST A MISDEMEANOR. THAT INCLUDES POSSESSION OF THE HARDEST DRUGS UNLESS EXCESSIVE QUANTITIES ARE SEIZED OR THERE ARE PREVIOUS POSSESSION CONVICTIONS."*
>
> **— MONA WILLIAMS**
> Wallowa County District Attorney

Rogers said that drug crimes are equally distributed between the two sexes and personal wealth has little to do with whether someone becomes an addict.

Williams added that one of the biggest problems law enforcement has is distinguishing legal treatment for people who are addicts, which is more a medical than criminal issue, and those who are dealers and manufacturers. She added that the circuit court has a drug treatment court that tries to intervene in the lives of users before jail sentences and stricter punishments. She said recently enacted laws are hampering those efforts.

"It's going to be harder to get people into treatment now that possession of a controlled substance is just a misdemeanor," Williams said. "That includes possession of the hardest drugs unless excessive quantities are seized or there are previous possession convictions.

"There's no big hammer for anyone that is just using," Williams said. She also noted that the law does not allow law enforcement to charge people with possession for drugs found in their system.

And, the law makes it harder to get people into treatment court because when it was a felony, the court had a conditional discharge it could use to steer addicts into treatment court, an 18-month program.

With successful treatment completed, charges would be dropped.

"Now they don't care about having misdemeanors on their record," Williams said. "Now we're at a point where we put them on probation, and then it's up to probation to deal with addiction issues and get them into treatment." All three said that few addicts were able to get clean by their own initiative and almost all of those were in the beginning stages of addiction.

Williams said that although the county is provided some money for the supervised probation, inpatient treatment for drug offenders was not funded. All three also contested the notion that decriminalizing possession would decrease the need for prison beds.

Very few, if any, Oregon addicts who weren't delivering or manufacturing drugs went to prison, according to Williams.

"They can't go to prison because under our guidelines grid, PCS of any controlled substance is only a level one crime," she said. "The most time anyone can do, even if it's a felony, is 30 days in jail whether it their first or third possession."

"It makes it more frustrating," Rogers said.

"It seems like our drug laws have done nothing but change in the 20 months I've been here," Fish added. Keeping up with the evolving drug trade is proving to be expensive. Tight budgets have resulted in personnel cuts at the county level, which has hurt enforcement efforts. The county spent well over the budgeted funds for housing prisoners last year.

"We need these people out of our community," Rogers said.

Still, silver linings remain. The recent federal recognition of an opioid crisis, although in its beginning stages, might encourage the federal government to provide funds at the community level to fight the crisis. The government's decision to come down hard on legalized marijuana also offers a ray of hope.

In the meantime, the three are centering the fight against drugs in the county's three school districts, trying to get a handle on the problem before it flourishes.

The county doesn't fund a school resources officer, but both police branches spend time around the school, ready to answer questions and let the students know that they're there to help. Williams has educated instructors on signs to look for in troubled students with a budding drug problem.

"We're always open to doing presentations if someone wants us to," Williams said.

The group also believes enlisting the public's support can be effective.

"Letting the community know what we're doing and what we're seeing is important," Williams said. "A lot of the public aren't using drugs, and honestly that's how we get a lot of our information."

Rogers said citizens in the county work hard, and it's difficult for them to live when they're fearful for their job, property or family.

"The best part I see coming out of this is the people who have been in denial about this will wake up and say, 'Oh boy, we have a problem.'"