

# Secretary of State Richardson reduces workload amid cancer battle

By Aubrey Weber  
Oregon Capital Bureau



Pamplin Media Group

Richardson has repeatedly said he has no intention of resigning. Richardson was diagnosed with brain cancer in late May. He announced the diagnosis in June, but has largely been silent on the details.

Oregon Secretary of State Dennis Richardson announced Monday he is further scaling back his workload to focus on treatment of his brain cancer.

Richardson didn't provide details about his new schedule.

"I will, of course, continue to be in frequent and regular contact with my staff that has been doing incredible work since the day we took office over two years ago," Richardson said in the news release. "I will also continue to be the decision-maker on all important issues."

Richardson's staff has repeatedly said the office is running as effectively as it always has, and that there is no impact on Oregonians. They have not said who has taken on his primary duties.

In late summer or early fall, Richardson relocated to his home of Central Point, where he conducts most of his work out of his law office. His staff has not said how often he is in Salem.

Through the summer, Richardson updated the public on his health through videos released on social media. He has repeatedly declined to give details on his condition, such as what type of brain cancer he has been diagnosed with, his treatment or what his prognosis is.

In late fall, Richardson again released a video in which he said his ability to communicate has been impacted. He talked slow in the video, at times unable to find the correct words.

Since announcing the

diagnosis, Richardson has scaled back public appearances considerably. During the fall election, Richardson was largely absent from the public eye, though his staff did release a video to him waving at voters and thanking them as they turned in ballots at a drive-through voting site.

Richardson didn't attend Gov. Kate Brown's inauguration. He was in Salem on Jan. 8 for the Kid Governor inauguration ceremony, a program he created. Several people gave speeches, but Richardson did not.

Richardson's schedule and emails show he has significantly lowered his workload through the summer and fall.

In November, state political operatives told Salem Reporter that Richardson had told top Oregon officials that he had been diagnosed with glioblastoma, the most

aggressive form of brain cancer. Richardson's staff has denied he ever disclosed his diagnosis.

In October, Richardson asked to delegate his position on the Oregon State Land Board to his deputy. That decision was challenged, and in December he withdrew his request to delegate after Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum informed him she did not believe he could do so.

The next land board meeting is Tuesday. It is not clear whether Richardson will participate by phone, as he has for the past several meetings.

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## Community Connection: Local organization brings us together in many ways

By Steve Tool  
Wallowa County Chieftain

Need some heating assistance? Help from the food bank? A reasonably priced lunch? A ride? Those and more are the types of connections provided by the community-themed organization for 50 years now. Serving Wallowa, Union, Baker and Grant counties, Community Connection started in Union County in 1969, spreading to Wallowa County sometime in the 1980s.

Wallowa County manager, Connie Guentert, started with the program in 2007. Although many know the agency for its senior citizen meal sites in Enterprise and Wallowa, Guentert noted, it's more — extensively more.

"Public transportation has become one of our largest programs, if not the

largest," Guentert said. "It's amazing. We've provided public transportation for 20 years, and I still hear, 'You have a bus?'"

Although the transportation mission is known for its public transport buses, it also provides medical transportation, which many are unaware of. However, senior nutrition is the focus of the agency.

"Senior nutrition will always be our flagship program," Guentert said.

The programs the agency administers under the senior nutrition umbrella include Meals on Wheels and safety checks for seniors. Also on the list is quarterly nutrition education for seniors.

"We'll talk about water, we'll talk about vegetables, eating a balanced diet, exercise — all that make a nutritionally balanced person," the director said. Every meal served must meet

USDA nutritional standards and the two agency sites serve 60-75 meals per day between Enterprise, Wallowa and Joseph. That number will grow as 30 percent of the county population is older than 65.

A new venture that Guentert is excited about is partnering with Safe Harbors, Wallowa County's organization dedicated to victims of domestic and sexual assault. The two agencies will work together to provide housing for victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.

"We've always assisted clients with our limited housing funds, but with this new partnership, the funds will be made available for three years," Guentert said. She added that it will not take away from Community Connection funds.

How does the agency, limited in funding and per-

sonnel take on these new projects?

"We wear many hats," Guentert said. "I try to think outside the box and work outside the box to make sure my clients are assisted, instead of staying in the box and saying no." Sometimes, it's the only answer.

"We can only afford to hire so many drivers or reimburse so many volunteer drivers," she said. "When transport requests outweigh resources to meet the client's needs, the staff take it personally."

Much work is done by volunteers, numbering in the dozens, and are pertinent to the agency's mission.

"If it weren't for volunteers, we wouldn't get done what we get done," she said. For example, the Meals on Wheels program is all done by volunteers. Other volunteer-heavy programs include the tax preparation, Tai Chi classes, volunteer medical drivers, food servers and desk people. Volunteers are still needed.

"We're always looking for some kind of volunteer," the director said. "If someone wants to donate their

time to our organization for services to this community, I don't turn them away."

For example, the senior nutrition programs at the Wallowa and Enterprise centers can always use help. Tax preparation helpers are a huge need.

Community Connection is a 501 ©(3) and donations are tax deductible. Neither the Wallowa or Enterprise food banks have dedicated funding and are completely reliant on donations. It gets shipments from the Oregon Food Bank once a month, but the agency pays for them, even if it's pennies on the dollar.

Donations to the food bank are always appreciated as are senior heating help donations. That program is intended for seniors who don't quite qualify for heating assistance because of their income and have difficulty paying their bills because of it.

Right now, donations are most urgently needed for sewer and water help for seniors as billing rates have gone up significantly in both Enterprise and Wallowa.

Other than cash flow, the biggest detriment to the

agency's mission are unrealistic expectations.

"A lot of times, we're asked to be everything for everyone," Guentert said. "Sometimes we're really good at that, and sometimes we face challenges within ourselves for a time in knowing that we can't. We want to do everything we can to assist our community. Every single staff person lives in this county. The people we help are our neighbors, friends and our family."

Has the mission changed during Guentert's tenure?

"No, I don't think so," she said. "I think our mission is all about community, family, self-sufficiency and assistance, whether it be low or moderate income families or seniors. I think that's our mission."

Guentert said community needs will determine future changes for the agency.

"We'll always be open to creating new services or changing services to fit the needs of our counties," she said. "We're flexible, and I think it's allowed the organization to be in place this long and still be going strong," she said.



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