

## EDITORIAL

## The housing challenge

A survey released last week has some daunting data about the lack of affordable housing in Baker County, and in particular in Baker City, which has about 60% of the county's 16,800 residents.

Although the survey, for which New Directions Northwest received a \$44,000 state grant, focused on housing needs for people who have a behavioral health condition, the findings show a wider problem.

About 250 people responded to the New Directions survey between March 1, 2022, and May 31, 2022.

Among the responses excerpted in the survey:

- “There are substantial barriers. Landlords have unrealistic goals for new renters believing it will weed out the bad ones — it doesn't. When someone lives month to month on SSI/SSDI for \$900 a month, and the landlord wants first/last/deposit/pet fees, coming up with close to \$3,000 just to move in is literally impossible. Then you have to pay an application fee. A property gets 100 applications with a \$35 application fee, they are making big money. Me having to apply for 10 homes just to get no reply is even more.”

- “Want 3x the rent for rental, at \$1,200 a month for a 2 bedroom; no one can afford that.”

- “There is NO affordable medium income housing available. ... same as the previous five years of this question are being asked and still nothing being done ... vouchers only work if there are houses, apartments, duplexes, studios available and built!”

The survey report also notes that federal data show rental rates in Baker County have increased substantially in Baker County over the past year, to about \$1,200 per month for a 3- or 4-bedroom home.

Home prices have also risen, and some homeowners have converted rental homes to temporary vacation rentals or sold their homes to take advantage of the rising prices, further reducing the supply of long-term housing.

The news isn't wholly negative, however.

New Directions recently received a \$1.4 million state grant, money the nonprofit intends to use to buy a modular home and two other homes that will be available for people with behavioral health issues. New Directions also plans to open a service center where people can get help figuring out their options for housing, including financial assistance.

A La Grande developer plans to build a 13-unit housing development for veterans near the Elkhorn Village apartments. And a 12-unit apartment complex is planned on Midway Drive near the hospital.

That's a start, but only a small one. According to a 2021 study by the Oregon Housing Alliance, Baker County needs about 265 “affordable” housing units. The study also found that about 63% of renters with very low incomes are spending more than half their incomes for rent.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



## OTHER VIEWS

## Reforms vital after CDC's fumbling on COVID-19

## EDITORIAL FROM THE MINNEAPOLIS STAR-TRIBUNE:

A North Dakota native has been named to a new and vital health care post. The nation ought to wish her well because the task before her is daunting: overseeing the overhaul of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) after its frustrating response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mary Wakefield, who was born and educated in Minnesota's northwest neighbor, is a nurse and veteran health care administrator who served as acting deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under former President Barack Obama. Last week, Wakefield was tapped to serve in a new role at the CDC: leading a team that will determine fixes to problems identified by two reviews of the agency's flawed COVID-19 approach.

Wakefield will bring a pragmatic Midwestern sensibility to the role, according to those who have worked with her. Even so, the task she faces is monumental.

Long considered one of the world's premier public health

assets, the CDC turned in a fumbling performance at a time when the agency's best work was needed. The stumbling began early with the bungled development of COVID-19 testing — a failing the Star Tribune Editorial Board sounded the alarm about on Feb. 6, 2020.

Unfortunately, the CDC failed to find its footing after that. While the agency is staffed with world-class scientists, they never gelled as a team. Early chaos surrounding supplies of personal protective equipment for health care workers was one result. But communication to the public was particularly problematic. For much of the pandemic, COVID-19 trackers built by The New York Times and nonprofit organizations filled in information gaps about cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

The information the CDC did provide was often slow and written for a scientific audience. Adequate explanations were missing when public health recommendations evolved. While these changes reflected expanding knowledge of the virus and other developments, too often they felt arbitrary. Masking is one example.

There was early equivocation about the value, but later the agency embraced masks as part of the strategy to stop COVID-19's spread. It felt like a switch had flipped, and the abruptness helped feed the rebellion against their use.

The agency's communication struggles have continued during the Biden administration.

Officials seem to have a tin ear when it comes to pleas for a second booster shot from those who aren't currently eligible — essentially, healthy adults under 50. Many are concerned about variants and worry about previous shots' waning protection.

The first step toward improvement requires acknowledging there's a problem. For that, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky merits praise. She stepped into that role in early 2021 as a presidential appointee, and it's to her credit that she recognizes the need for reform.

“I thought she called it out like real leadership does,” Andy Slavitt, a former Minnesota health care executive who served on President Joe Biden's COVID-19 response team, told an editorial writer. Slavitt also was the acting head of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid

Services during the Obama administration.

Slavitt applauded the move to have Wakefield oversee reforms at the CDC. He worked with her at the federal level and said she's focused, practical and “listens before she talks.”

Minnesota infectious disease expert Michael Osterholm also lauded Walensky's reform efforts. Implementing change will be challenging though, he said, adding that the “devil is in the details.”

In an interview, Osterholm called on Congress to ensure the CDC has the funding and other resources it needs to carry out its vital mission.

The Star Tribune Editorial Board agrees and would like to see Minnesota's congressional delegation at the forefront of this.

The CDC has many critics. With that comes a responsibility to right this ship. Everyone has an interest because disease threats continue, as monkeypox's spread and polio's re-emergence illustrate.

As to the importance of getting CDC reforms right, Osterholm said, “If this were on a scale of 1 to 10, this is about a 12.”

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot

verify the accuracy of all statements in letters.

- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.

- The writer must include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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## COLUMN

## Focus fails, and a new book mixes humor, grammar

My eyes began to fail me along about the second grade, which strikes me as an awfully premature deterioration for such vital organs, especially considering the rest of me was likely to stumble along for several decades more.

Literally stumble, what with the affliction of astigmatism.

Indeed this seems to have been the case, as I'm still around more than 40 years after finishing second grade. Although I blame a general lack of balance, rather than my eyesight, for my occasional tumbles in the ensuing years.

Yet even though most of my other original accessories retain a gratifying percentage of their peak function, my visual decline, after more than a quarter century of relative stability, has recently accelerated.

It's almost as though my eyes are reliving their childhood, so to speak.

Three years ago, an optometrist who had just given my corneas a good going over assured me, with what seemed a certain smugness, that this fuzzy future was inevitable.

He acted surprised, and possibly was even a trifle skeptical, when I told him that, at age 48, I didn't have any great trouble reading a book without holding it at arm's length.

But it was true.

In 2019.

The accuracy of that earlier statement, to my chagrin, has gradually shrunk ever since, to the point at which



Jayson Jacoby

kernel of truth, so beloved by prevaricators, can today be measured in angstroms.

Indeed, my arms are scarcely long enough to keep any reading material at a suitable distance.

Beyond that threshold I can still discern objects with some precision.

Contact lenses — accessories I have relied on since my parents allowed me to give up the spectacles I had endured for most of elementary school — have continued to keep my distance vision relatively crisp.

Reading a book or scanning my phone, by contrast, has become a migraine-inducing exercise in frustration.

I returned recently to the same eye doctor. Rather than afford him the satisfaction of forcing me to concede, by way of answering his questions, that his prediction had proved true, I told him right off that I needed to buy reading glasses.

He accepted this without any obvious gloating, which I appreciated.

(I doubt he remembered our previous conversation on the matter in any detail, but I imagine my records — perhaps amended with an asterisk, that classic expression of skepticism — mentioned my 2019 claim about undiminished close up acuity.)

I have long had a pair of prescrip-

tion eyeglasses, which I wear mainly in the evening, when my contacts sometimes leave my eyes feeling a bit dry and scratchy. The adjustment to wearing reading glasses wasn't especially wearisome.

The optometrist suggested I buy multiple pairs, a recommendation that irked me slightly. He said something to the effect that it's easy to misplace a pair of spectacles, which I suppose is reasonable.

But it seemed to me he was implying that my inability to focus is but a symptom of a more general decline, and one that will erode my mental as well as physical faculties.

I might as well prepare, his tone suggested, to worry not so much whether I can make out the words on the page but whether I can remember where I left the book.

As it turned out I did buy a package of three pairs of reading glasses.

But that's only because the price was just a buck or so more than for a single pair, which struck me as a nifty bargain.

And I'll have the optometrist know that I can locate each of the three pairs without taking even a moment to ponder where they might have gotten to.

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I remember rather vividly the morning I met Ellen Jovin. I remember in particular how normal the episode was. It was in late August 2019, on the east side of Main Street in downtown

Baker City.

The timing matters because I made Jovin's acquaintance before 2020. Which is to say, we met in those halcyon days when those of us who aren't virologists, if confronted by the word coronavirus, would have offered by way of definition something like “a hangover induced by excessive consumption of a light Mexican lager.”

(I'm pretty sure that's what I would have suggested, anyway.)

Neither of us could have known, of course, that little more than half a year later, our casual encounter almost certainly wouldn't have happened.

Among much else, the pandemic temporarily rendered previously mundane events, including a journalist interviewing a subject, rather more complicated.

On that mild and sunny late summer morning, though, I simply walked a couple blocks from my office, introduced myself and started jotting notes.

But it's not only nostalgia that makes our meeting memorable, nearly three years after it happened. Jovin was sitting behind a table bearing a sign: “Grammar Table.”

Jovin, who lives in New York City and has degrees from Harvard and UCLA, was touring the U.S. that summer, setting up her table, with its peculiar sign, in cities big and small, inviting people to stop by and chat about grammatical matters.

I'm no grammarian but I have a great appreciation for the process of

assembling words into sentences and paragraphs, a type of construction which can be as daunting as putting up a skyscraper or a great bridge.

(Albeit with less potential for ghastly wounds — a phrase that's out of plumb can crumble, to be sure, but the debris is much less dangerous, to flesh and bone, compared with chunks of concrete or steel girders.)

I figured I would enjoy talking with Jovin, and I did. She had a palpable passion not only for proper punctuation, which can be challenging but at least is governed by specific rules, but also for the vastly more mysterious matter of trying to corral thoughts, which flit about with dizzying speed and rarely come into sharp focus, and round them into an order that rings with pleasant rhythm in the ear.

Jovin was also gathering material for a book, which went on sale nationwide on July 19 of this year. In “Rebel With A Clause” Jovin deftly combines an entertaining travelogue with an eminently useful guide to grammar — a curious hybrid that I suspect would have failed badly in hands less skilled than Jovin's.

Jovin sent me a copy and I've enjoyed it greatly. It makes a fine companion to the peerless “Elements of Style” by Will Strunk and E.B. White and another of my favorite books about writing — William Zinsser's “On Writing Well.”

■ Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.