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Maintaining mental health amid a public health crisis

Community Counseling Solutions offers telehealth options and a free peer-to-peer support line

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

As the new coronavirus continues to wreak havoc on the healthcare system and economy, half of all Americans, according to an April 2 poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation, reported that worry or stress related to the global pandemic is having a negative impact on their mental health.



Thad Labhart

Traumatic events such as a serious illness, a significant loss of income or the death of a loved one rank high among the most stressful experiences that people endure, according to a study from the National Institutes of Health.

Meanwhile, traditional face-to-face mental health services rapidly shift to telehealth. The state Department of Consumer and Business Affairs, which regulates the commercial insurance industry, and the Oregon Health Authority, which oversees Medicaid, loosened telehealth regulations as the COVID-19 outbreak rages across the state.

In Grant County, mental health services via phone and internet have never been more accessible.

"We were lucky enough to have a remote platform in place before COVID-19 popped up," said Thad Labhart, clinical director for Community Counseling Solutions.

Labhart said the platform came to CCS through secondary grant funding 16-18 months ago and that 95% of clients are being seen via the telehealth platform.

"We are trying to mitigate folks coming in at all and trying to find alternatives to have contact with them for their health and our staff's health," Labhart said.

Labhart said the drug and alcohol rehabilitation groups have moved to individual, remote sessions. He said CCS is in the process of bringing on a virtual group meeting platform.

He said the state has rolled back restrictions to

urinalysis collection for those in mandated drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

While Labhart said he was not sure whether 12-step support groups were meeting via online platforms, he said people can go to mystrength.com for information on drug and alcohol support groups and for additional information about mental illness.

Labhart said the effects of the virus and its implications on the collective mental health of the community are "speculative."

"We really don't know because it is all very new," Labhart said.

However, he said absent COVID-19, he wants people to know that CCS can be a local resource for them.

A barrier that Labhart said he addresses any time he talks to the media or partners in the community is the stigma that surrounds mental illness.

"Stigma is a huge barrier, particularly in a small town, where we know our neighbors and people have fears about being judged for coming in," Labhart said.

Before COVID-19, Labhart said that providers would meet some clients away from the office, be it their home, a coffee shop or remotely.

"What better time to utilize our platforms where you can do it much more privately and on your own time and dime," Labhart said.

Labhart said he wants people who are curious to know more about therapy that there is no commitment on their part to meet with a provider over the phone, online or in person.

"There is no commitment; if you want to reach out and talk to somebody and kind of gauge what it might be like and ask questions, we'll gladly have a conversation before we dive into a full assessment and a recommendation," Labhart said. "We can make it what you want."

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The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Chester's Thriftway employee Tom Biggar stocks the dairy cooler Monday. Grocery stores across the country have struggled to keep up with demand as consumers stockpile staple items to prepare for stay-at-home orders.

CHESTER'S THRIFTWAY CLEARED OF PRICE GOUGING

Statewide, complaints persist of excessive price hikes

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

With the soaring costs of eggs tripling in the month of March, Chester's Thriftway in John Day fended off complaints of price gouging and were officially cleared by the Oregon Department of Justice April 7.

"It is clear you have not used the COVID virus emergency as a cause to price gouge on the price of eggs," said Dale Geiger with Oregon DOJ in an email shared on the grocery store's Facebook page.

Longtime Operations Manager Bill Wyllie, in the same post, said those with further questions can make an appointment by calling 541-575-2141 to discuss the pricing structure and details of the cost of eggs.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said wholesale egg prices have tripled since the beginning of March. According to the same report from the USDA, many



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

When suppliers' prices rise, grocers are faced with two options: pass along the cost to consumers or take the hit to profit.

grocers are taking losses by not passing along the increase to their customers.

Wyllie said Chester's was among those grocers last month, after their egg supplier requested a retraction on an advertisement because they could not honor the published sale of two dozen eggs for \$4.

Price gouging, according to the DOJ website, is the sale of essential consumer goods or services at an "unconscionably excessive price" after the governor declares that an abnormal disruption of the market exists. The law covers retail outlets, merchants and wholesalers that sell essential consumer goods, such as food, water, fuel, medical supplies and hotel rooms. Whether a product or service is essential depends on the nature

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'IT IS CLEAR YOU HAVE NOT USED THE COVID VIRUS EMERGENCY AS A CAUSE TO PRICE GOUGE ON THE PRICE OF EGGS.'

Dale Geiger with Oregon DOJ

State legislators discuss how to lift the Oregon economy

Findley, Owens, Bonham: 'Flatten the curve, not the economy'

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Flatten the curve, not the economy: This was the message state Reps. Mark Owens, R-Crane, and Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, and state Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, wanted to share as the predicted number of COVID-19 cases go down.

"The whole idea of social distancing and the restrictions that we put in place was to flatten the curve, and the data that we're getting from (the Oregon Health Authority) suggest that we've done that," Bonham said. "Now the question is at what point do you return to nor-



Rep. Mark Owens

malcy? It's the question we've been asking the governor for three weeks. ... Yesterday her answer was 10-14 days of no COVID-related deaths."

Bonham said he appreciated the concern for life but added that this measurement would be tough to achieve.

On April 9, during a virtual town hall meeting, the three state legislators talked about the success that Oregon has seen thanks to social distancing and a focus on flattening the curve with a report from state health officials on April 2 showing a



Rep. Lynn Findley

decline of 50% to 70% of predicted positive coronavirus cases.

Findley said that small businesses are the backbone of the economy and that these restriction have hurt them significantly. He added that there are now 80,000 unemployment insurance applicants and that this pandemic could change how business is done, even when it concludes.

Owens said, for businesses to move forward, regulations put in place because of the virus would have to be toned down. Owens added

that an important part of addressing this problem is to not treat all of Oregon the same.

One question came in talking about restaurants hit by this crisis and if there is a possibility to have dine-in options with proper social distancing measures.

"We hope, I think all three of us, to get some rules from the governor on social distancing so as soon as we meet our goals we can start phasing that in," Owens said. "I have a personal friend who is a restaurant owner, and they are suffering bad. We need to figure out how we can maintain social distancing and allow people to come in and start partaking, or we'll lose them (restaurants)."

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