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## COVID spikes in E. Oregon prisons

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

EASTERN OREGON — Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution and Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla County still are in quarantine due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout their facilities, according to the Department of Corrections COVID-19 tracking website.

Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker County is in a heightened state of alert and testing according to the same tracker, as cases rose amongst the staff and prisoner population at the end of January. Seven out of the 15 prisons in Oregon were in Tier 4 status as of Feb. 8 — meaning that those facilities are under quarantine.

Overall, case numbers had increased dramatically through January, peaking at 286 active cases for Two Rivers on Jan. 20. In December, those numbers were in the single digits.

Those case numbers fell throughout the week. As of Feb. 8, Two Rivers had just one active case of COVID-19, though it still remained in tier 4 status.

As a percentage of total cases during the entire pandemic against the number of beds at each facility, Two Rivers ranked the highest by a wide margin. The case-to-bed rate was at 64.18%, while the average across all prisons in Oregon was 31.81%.

Corrections officials wouldn't say whether or not the COVID-19 cases that spurred a large spike at Two Rivers were due to a staff member, but case numbers and dates shared with EO Media Group show staff at Two Rivers had tested positive on Dec. 29, just 10 days before members of the prison population showed a spike in positive tests.

"There is no way of knowing exactly how each positive case originates or is spread," said

Betty Bernt, communications manager for the Oregon Department of Corrections. "When an individual comes into our intake unit, our current process is to test all adults in custody."

Juan Chavez, project director and attorney with the Oregon Justice Resource Center, disagrees.

"There's only one way for the virus to get in, and that's through the staff," he said. "It's abundantly clear that mask wearing has been scant in particular with correctional officers. They haven't been enforcing the mask wearing policy, they just let it slide. They're more afraid of losing staff than they are of killing people, in my mind."

Chavez noted because intake goes through Coffee Creek Correctional Facility — DOC's intake facility in Wilsonville where adults in custody are tested, isolated and quarantined before being transferred to other parts of the state — the possibility of an inmate bringing the virus into a different prison is remote.

The Oregon Justice Resource Center is involved in a class action lawsuit against the Department of Corrections due to conditions at the prisons regarding COVID-19 safety. That lawsuit is expected to go before a judge for certification on Feb. 14.

Chavez said the lawsuit, filed in April 2020, asked only the bare minimum from the Department of Corrections regarding safety procedures in combating the spread of COVID-19. Those measures included mandatory masking for correctional officers and implementing social distancing requirements.

Those requirements, according to the lawsuit, were widely ignored.

In the lawsuit, one plaintiff described an interaction with staff that conveyed DOC's reac-

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Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

The vacant building on Canyon Boulevard in John Day that Choices Recovery, a Prineville-based drug treatment provider, planned to turn into an outpatient drug treatment clinic with funding from a grant program set up by Oregon's drug-decriminalization law, Measure 110. The Oregon Health Authority withdrew the \$285,250 grant shortly after issuing the award in May.

## Still waiting for help

County has yet to receive M110 drug treatment funds

By STEVEN MITCHELL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Oregonians who voted for Measure 110 did not just decriminalize small amounts of most illegal drugs, including methamphetamine, heroin and cocaine; they also redirected millions of dollars in marijuana tax revenue to drug rehabilitation providers to expand access to treatment.

But so far, more than a year after Oregon's first-in-the-nation drug decriminalization law went into effect, none of that money has found its way to Grant County.

In May, Choices Recovery Services, a Prineville-based provider, was slated to receive \$285,250 — the only funding awarded to a provider in Grant County — and announced plans to open an outpatient clinic in John Day.

However, according to Darla Byus, a former owner of Choices Recovery, state health officials withdrew the grant.

"They (Oregon Health Authority) wanted (the grant) to be for an expansion of already-in-place services," Byus said in a phone interview. "And since we were not already in place in John Day, they did not approve it."

According to Byus, Choices Recovery has since shut down, including removing the website and closing the email account. Byus said she closed the company for "personal reasons."

Tim Heider, a public information officer with the Oregon Health Authority, confirmed Choices did not get the grant. Heider declined to answer questions about why the funding did not get approved but added that Choices' grant award "is under review by an outside jurisdiction."

Meanwhile, Byus' former clinical supervisor, Brian Beltz, has started his own company, #Recovery. Byus said Beltz

is currently looking for a location in John Day, and she would work at the office under a contract to complete paperwork and other administrative tasks.

Byus said #Recovery would use the same harm reduction model Choices used, which does not require complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol, unlike most traditional approaches to treating substance abuse. Instead, the focus is on reducing destructive social and health consequences, such as overdose and death.

She said the facility would also offer peer support services, recovery mentors, and outreach work in the community. Byus said she sold Beltz the recovery literature she used at Choices.

Byus' comments were similar to those she shared with the John Day City Council during an Aug. 24 meeting.

At that meeting, Byus told councilors that Choices Recovery's outpatient clinic on Canyon Boulevard would have a nurse practitioner on staff so the clinic could provide medication treatment, along with counseling, parenting classes and peer support.

Not only that, but the clinic would work closely with Community Counseling Solutions, law enforcement, the Department of Human Services and other community partners.

But, according to Community Counseling Solutions CEO Kimberly Lindsay, nobody from Choices Recovery ever reached out to cultivate a relationship.

Thad Labhart, the clinical director for CCS, said he must have called Byus at least three times before she returned his call. Then, after they set up a meeting, Byus didn't show up, Labhart said. He said it took another couple of calls to reschedule, and she again did not show. Finally, Labhart said, she called and apologized, saying that she had conflicts with the ear-

lier meeting times.

Labhart said CCS had applied for \$302,836 to expand access to drug treatment in Morrow, Wheeler, Gilliam and Grant counties and was disappointed the state did not fund any of those requests.

Labhart said he met with state health officials and an OHA consultant. In the meetings, Labhart noted, the health officials told him that while CCS's application scored well, there were not enough dollars to go around.

In one of those meetings, according to Labhart, an OHA representative told him the state had awarded Choices a grant to expand services in Grant County.

Out of the gate, Labhart said, he wanted to understand why a Prineville-based provider wanted to open a clinic in Grant County. So he asked other community partners if they had heard anything about Choices and, more importantly, if they had heard from Choices. And they had not.

"(Learning about Choices) was more than just curiosity. I felt if there was going to be another treatment provider in town, we needed to take the proactive initiative to reach out to see where there might be opportunities to collaborate, complement (one another), rather than compete," Labhart said. "And be mindful of the small local work force."

Labhart said that when he initially spoke to Byus, she mentioned Choices had planned to open an outpatient clinic in Dayville. It was only later he heard that Choices planned on opening a location in John Day.

Byus had a different recollection of events. In an email to the newspaper, she said that she and her staff had reached out to all community partners in the county regarding working together and got what

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A sign stands at the entrance of Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla as the sun rises April 2, 2021.

## Malheur chief offers compromise

Trulock plans mix of long- and short-term logging deals

By STEVEN MITCHELL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The Malheur National Forest will issue another long-term stewardship deal in an open bid process starting in November, but it will also use another contracting mechanism to bring in additional independent contractors and add flexibility in meeting forest management goals and budget constraints.

Malheur National Forest Supervisor Craig Trulock announced the agency's decision at a Thursday, Feb. 10, meeting of the Grant County Natural Resource Advisory Committee at the Grant County Regional Airport.

With the current long-term contract set to expire early next year, federal forest managers have been trying to decide what form stewardship contracting on



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

The 10-year stewardship contract awarded to Iron Triangle in 2013 is widely credited with improving John Day's last surviving lumber mill, creating hundreds of jobs and saving forest health but has also prompted criticism from other logging companies.

the forest should take in the future.

While Trulock said he had been leaning toward awarding another long-term contract, he has been contemplating some changes in the next stew-

ardship deal, such as decreasing the guaranteed 70% of timber volume coming off the forest to between 30 and 50%.

The 10-year stewardship contract

awarded to Iron Triangle in 2013, estimated to be worth roughly \$69 million, expires in March of 2023.

The John Day logging company's current deal is what's known as an integrated resource service contract, a mechanism that Trulock said has both pluses and minuses.

With 70% of the total volume of Malheur National Forest timber sales going to the program, Trulock said, that provides a high level of predictability for the contractor while also guaranteeing a steady supply of logs for Malheur Lumber's John Day sawmill.

But, Trulock said, having so much of the national forest's discretionary timber revenue committed to the stewardship contract could create a problem for the agency's budget.

Additionally, despite the fact that the stewardship contract was awarded through a competitive bidding process, the 10-year deal has prompted criticism

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