



Eastern Oregon Center for Independent Living/Contributed Photo
Issak Garcia, Eastern Oregon Center for Independent Living's HIV prevention specialist, stocks shelves with home test kits.

HIV testing ramps up in E.Oregon

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about HIV testing, prevention and treatment in Oregon, visit endhivoregon.org.

PENDLETON — A campaign to raise awareness about HIV testing is underway in Eastern Oregon.

Eastern Oregon Center for Independent Living, based in Ontario, has partnered with End HIV Oregon for a new advertising campaign between April and July that will focus on Pendleton, Hermiston, La Grande, Ontario and their surrounding towns.

"We've seen an uptick in HIV-positive cases in rural Eastern Oregon, and sexually transmitted disease cases, and so we thought it was just perfect timing," said Kirt Toombs, CEO and founder of EOCIL. "We've been working on this campaign since 2012, and we thought this was a good time to raise awareness."

According to the press release, national physician groups recommend that everyone be tested for HIV at least once. But most adult Oregonians have never been tested for HIV. People in more rural parts of the state are even less likely than people living in urban areas to be tested in a timely manner.

Toombs said testing and awareness are especially important because of the increase in positive cases in Eastern Oregon.

"It's almost quadrupled," he said. "Even though the numbers are low, we've gone from three cases to almost, I believe, 12 cases. And so that's quite a bit, and that's definitely made us take a look at what needs to happen around raising awareness and making tools available."

The campaign will utilize radio ads, billboards and newspaper ads to raise awareness about testing. Toombs said testing already is available, but awareness has been lacking.

"We have the tools available, but I think what was missing is that we needed to make people aware that they're available," he said.

One of the major points of the campaign is to highlight

that everyone has an HIV status, whether they've been tested or not.

"We all have an HIV status, and we should all be tested for HIV at least once, if not more frequently," said Joseph Fiumara, director for Umatilla County Public Health, in a press release. "I'm thrilled to see this campaign launch here to continue building healthier communities in our part of the state."

EOCIL provides HIV prevention and case management services in Baker, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Wasco and Wheeler counties. Among those counties, 222 people are living with HIV, according to the EOCIL press release.

As well as raising awareness with the intent of improving the number of tests administered in rural Eastern Oregon, Toombs said reducing stigma associated with the virus is paramount, and advances in medicine and technology have made living with the virus easier.

"It's night and day from 30 years ago," he said. "We're coming up on the anniversary of the passing of Ryan White (Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act), and so it makes us look back at where we were 30 years ago, and where we are now. Science is just amazing, and (with) the medical care that people are getting now — we're living longer and healthier lives."

Those medical advances include PrEP, a prophylactic drug that reduces HIV transmission rates by 99%, according to medical studies. Therapy drugs HIV-positive individuals use also can completely eliminate the transmission of HIV if the virus is undetectable by tests, through a process called Undetected = Untransmittable.

"We shouldn't have to fear having an HIV test or getting treatment," Toombs said, "or having access to prevention tools that are available to us."

Pendleton responds to crash reports

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Pendleton city officials are pushing back against a Bloomberg News article that reported several drone crashes at the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range.

According to an article published April 10, Bloomberg reviewed internal documents, read government reports and spoke with 13 current and former employees associated with Amazon Prime Air, a drone package delivery project that has conducted tests in Pendleton, among several other sites across the country. The news agency's reporting revealed safety concerns and crashes hampered Amazon's testing program.

"While experimental aircraft are expected to crash during test flights, current and former employees say pressure to get the program back on track has prompted some managers to take unnecessary risks that have put personnel in harm's way," reporters Spencer Soper and Matt Day wrote.

Bloomberg reported Amazon drones crashed five times during a four-month period in 2021 and obtained a 911 record that details a fire in a wheat field that a drone crash set off near the Pendleton airport.

An Amazon spokesperson told Bloomberg that Pendleton city officials hadn't previously made public comments about the crashes. But during an interview Wednesday, April 13, with the East Oregonian,

City Manager Robb Corbett and Economic Development Director Steve Chrisman, who oversees the airport and UAS operations, talked about the Bloomberg article and how transparent they should be about drone crashes.

Chrisman touted the growth of the test range from an entity that saw few operations in its early years to a busy hub for drone activity that frequently attracts the world's top tech and aviation companies. Chrisman didn't mention Amazon or other companies by name, citing nondisclosure agreements the city signed, but he said "a very small number of mishaps" paled in comparison to the thousands of operations the range has hosted.

"Those were disgruntled employees that had an ax to grind," he said, referring to the sources in the Bloomberg article. "As far as reporting, I don't know that we've ever called (the East Oregonian) when a Cessna wheel fell off or when a crosswind blew over a plane. If you call us, we certainly respond. But we're not the National Transportation Safety Board."

Chrisman and Corbett said the test range was committed to safety but would not go out of its way to advertise crashes, especially because they were happening in sparsely populated areas and did not hurt anyone. Corbett said some of these incidents were like when "an ambulance backs into a car in a parking lot," a situation that might generate a 911 call but not a public record.

Range Manager Darryl Abling said the UAS range makes a record of every test

operation and sends the data to officials at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the institution that oversees Oregon's test range system, who then forwards it to the Federal Aviation Administration. A crash might trigger an extra layer of reporting to the FAA or NTSB depending on the severity of the incident, but not every malfunction or emergency landing needed to be cataloged.

Abling also said he didn't know where Bloomberg sourced its information, but its reporting didn't align with the range's internal data.

The Pendleton Fire Department responds to any fires at the airport, but Fire Chief Jim Critchley said he defers any details about the cause of the fires to range staff, comparing it to the way he would defer to St. Anthony Hospital when the department's work intersects with the hospital's.

Critchley said he continues to explore ways to staff Pendleton Fire Station No. 3, the station at the Pendleton airport. In the meantime, Critchley said the department intends to relocate its interns to housing at the airport. The interns will serve as reserves in their off time, allowing them to potentially respond to fires at the airport during those periods.

Eastern Oregon Regional Airport Manager John Honemann on April 13 reported 15 companies were using the UAS Range that day, either as resident or itinerant clients. The range conducts 500 to 1,000 operations per month. Chrisman said the Pendleton range could be the busiest in the world and the number of tests at the range looks to triple this year.

BMCC plans deep cuts to faculty

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After warning about impending budget cuts for months, the other shoe has dropped at Blue Mountain Community College.

At an April 25 budget committee meeting, BMCC administration will propose shuttering three programs and eliminating 10 full-time faculty positions in addition to several part-time positions. Should the BMCC Board of Education approve the move, the college would lose its criminal justice, college prep and industrial systems technology programs while also dropping instructors from its business, English, humanities/fine arts, math/computer science, science and social science departments.

In a Wednesday, April 13 interview, Blue Mountain President Browning said the budget cuts need to be made to help close a \$2 million shortfall in the 2022-23 budget.

"We have to start living within our means," he said. "That's the bottom line."

The news was not well received by the Blue Mountain Faculty Association, the union that represents the college's instructors.

Union President Pete Hernberg described the list of proposed cuts as "extraordinary and shocking" and raises questions about the college's commitment to the community.

"These cuts are shocking," he said. "They are arbitrary. And they are unnecessary."

Hernberg questioned why BMCC administration wanted to cut the college's criminal justice program at a time when law enforcement was trying to recruit skilled personnel. He added that eliminating the industrial systems technology department represented a "broken promise" to Board-

man, which would still have its Workforce Training Center but not one of the signature programs the center houses.

Browning was prepared to defend his administration's choices.

He said a degree from the college's criminal justice program isn't a requirement to enter the law enforcement field, and while he admitted the industrial systems technology had been a "good idea" when it was started, the program's low enrollment meant it can be replaced in Boardman by the higher-demand diesel tech program.

Browning turned his focus to the English program, which would lose one of its instructors under the administration's proposal. He said the department's four-person staff is the same size as it was a decade ago, even though enrollment has shrunk 65% over the past 11 years.

BMCC, and other community colleges across the state, have seen significant enrollment declines in recent years, and Blue Mountain staff are starting to see the effects of that trend.

Since 2019, the college has reduced its workforce by 39 positions, albeit under different presidents. Those figures don't include additional staffing cuts made when Blue Mountain was forced to renegotiate its prison education contract with the Oregon Department of Corrections during that time period.

This round of proposed cuts differs from previous years because it mostly focuses on making cuts to faculty. With previous staff reductions focused on administration or classified staff, Browning said there was little room to cut in those areas.

But Hernberg argued that BMCC was using its budget to deprioritize instruction and programming in favor of contracts with consultants and tech companies.

"What our community needs is jobs and training for those jobs," he said. "What our community needs are degrees and classes toward those degrees. That's the promise that our taxpayers expect us to keep. They don't expect us to hire some consulting firm. They don't expect us to send a giant chunk of cash to some tech company."

Browning contested Hernberg's interpretation of the proposed budget, saying they were one-time investments in improving the college's web-

site and conducting a review of Blue Mountain's programs, moves that will better position the college for the future.

At a time when BMCC is facing increasing competition from nearby community colleges in Washington and trade schools, Browning said the staffing cuts could actually help with recruitment.

"We're not actually offering fewer classes," he said. "We're having fewer people offer the classes that we do currently have, and we'll be offering new and different approaches to some of the outcomes so that (students are) better employable upon completion. The assertion that we're offering fewer classes is simply not borne out in the data."

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Reelect David Baum Oregon Trail Electric Board, Position 8

STATEMENT TO VOTERS: The electric utility industry is seeing significant changes due to increased demand, new technologies, government mandates, high prices of natural gas and oil, and weather renewables (solar and wind). Weather renewables work only when the Sun is shining and the Wind is blowing.

Currently OTEC purchases 100% of its electrical power from Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and some of the lowest electrical rates in the country. But BPA is being challenged with increasing costs, reduced revenue, and threat of the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. As the board member involved with the Wildfire Mitigation Plan, we have aggressively pushed forward with the drafting and finalization of a Wildfire Plan.

As we negotiate a new contract with Bonneville (BPA), my legal experience is a valuable evaluation tool. My focus will be to continue to work diligently in areas of Power Supply, Transmission and Distribution. I will strive to keep your electrical rates low.

Our CEO, Les Penning and staff with board support will not be raising your electrical rates for 2022.

It's been a pleasure and a privilege to serve as your representative on the board of Directors. I have gained a significant knowledge and experience about cooperatives during this time. I will continue to work hard at keeping electric rates low while providing safe and reliable electricity to our members along with excellent customer service. I have knowledge, experience, energy and time to serve.

I ask for YOUR VOTE and look forward to our future challenges.

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