

County steps up for mentally ill

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County is stepping up to reduce the number of mentally ill people in the county jail.

Commissioner George Murdock said mental illness is a major concern nationwide and Umatilla County is no different.

"We have way too many people in jail suffering from mental illness," he said.

To help take on the problem, the county board of commissioners is adopting the Stepping Up Initiative, a national program to get county officials to work with law enforcement, judges, district attorneys and treatment providers to divert people with mental illness from jails and into treatment.

The National Association of Counties, The Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiat-

ric Association Foundation launched the initiative in May 2015. According to stepuptogether.org, the initiative's website, 449 counties nationwide participate with 19 in Oregon, including Sherman, Gilliam and Union counties.

Murdock said the resolution to step into Stepping Up acknowledges the mental health situation the country faces:

"Two million people with serious mental illness end up in jails each year across the nation.

"Jail populations have three to six times as many adults suffering from serious mental illness as the general population.

"Adults with mental illness who go to jail tend to have longer stays and a higher rate of re-offending than people without mental illness.

Sheriff Terry Rowan earlier this year sought \$1 million from the Legislature to

renovate the jail to accommodate inmates with mental health issues. The state did not fund the investment.

Under this new call to action, the county promises to take several steps to tackle the crisis, from setting up a team to address safe reduction in jail to tracking data on the mentally ill coming into jail, as well as identifying local and state policy and funding barriers to treatment and to sharing what it learns with other counties.

Rowan said he supports Stepping Up, but there may be a practical limit on its effectiveness.

"The only concern I have is resources available to the population to go to this," he said. "That's what we seem to have to battle against day in and day out."

Much of what Stepping Up strives to achieve, he said, aligns with the goals of Oregon's Justice Reinvestment Act, which provides state funding for local pro-

grams to reduce the prison population, hold offenders accountable, cut back on offenders committing new crimes and increasing the public safety. Rowan said more Oregon counties adopting the initiative could create a tipping point for state lawmakers to take notice and create a behavioral reinvestment program.

Murdock also advocates for that approach. The state in 2014 shut down the Blue Mountain Recovery Center, a psychiatric facility in Pendleton, but did not establish a new one. He said the Justice Reinvestment Act is a model that works well and it cost effective.

"If the state would make a companion mental health reinvestment initiative, I think that would make huge inroads for us," he said.

The county commissioners vote on the Stepping Up Initiative when they meet Tuesday starting at 9 a.m. at the courthouse in Pendleton.

Lawrence honored as Administrator of the Year



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY HEIDI SIPE
Bob Lawrence shows off his Administrator of the Year award in Seaside.

HERMISTON HERALD

Umatilla High School Principal Bob Lawrence has been named 2018 Administrator of the Year by the Oregon Small School Association.

Lawrence has worked for Umatilla School District for 27 years, starting out as an elementary school principal, and has been UHS principal since 2016.

A news release from Umatilla School District called him a "transformational" leader known for his willingness to serve his students and staff.

Nominator Julie Hunt, the district's special education director, described him as "sincere and strategic in his efforts."

"Though he never seeks the spotlight, he is a deserving award recipient," said Superintendent Heidi Sipe. "Umatilla schools are fortunate to have Mr. Lawrence as a valued member of our leadership team."

Lawrence was hon-

ored June 22 in Seaside by the Oregon Small School Association. In a copy of his acceptance speech provided by USD, he called his time at the high school the most challenging and rewarding of his career, and said he had felt honored recently to be able to present high school diplomas to the students that he once welcomed to McNary Heights Elementary School as kindergartners.

Distracted driving could add up to jail time

By JADE MCDOWELL
STAFF WRITER

Penalties for using your phone while driving started adding up on Sunday — in some cases all the way up to possible jail time for repeat offenders.

While Oregon's new, stricter distracted driving law went into effect last October, drivers had a grace period where offenses were dealt with individually. Now, the fines will get bigger with each offense after July 1.

"If it's not enough encouragement to think you might contribute to a crash, think that the police might be out specifically looking for people using their phones, and the dollars can add up," said Oregon Department of Transportation spokesperson Shelley Snow.

A first offense not contributing to a crash is a Class B violation with a fine of up to \$1,000. A second offense, or first offense contributing to a crash, is a Class A violation with a fine of up to \$2,000. Three offenses within 10 years ramps up to a Class B misdemeanor — meaning a fine of up to \$2,500, a criminal record and a possible penalty of up to 6 months in jail.

Drivers under 18 can't use any electronic devices while driving, even if they are hands-free. Adults can



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

New laws that went into effect with the new year include stiffer penalties for texting while driving.

use hands-free devices but cannot use any function on a phone or other electronic device like a tablet that requires holding or touching the device beyond a single touch to activate. The rules include drivers who are stopped at a traffic signal or stuck in stand-still traffic.

A few exemptions apply, including drivers making a 911 call during an emergency and professionals such as bus drivers and ambulance drivers who are acting in the scope of their employment.

ODOT reported that this year an unofficial tally shows Oregon has had 172 traffic fatalities so far, up 17.8 percent from this time last year. From 2012-2016, according to the department, Oregon saw 10,814 crashes involving a distracted driver, including 70 fatalities.

"Distracted driving is an

epidemic in Oregon, and the consequences can be deadly," Troy E. Costales, Transportation Safety Division administrator, said in a statement. "Everyone using the transportation system — drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians alike — should put away the distractions when traveling to help eliminate these tragedies."

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