

EDITOR'S DESK

Mental health shouldn't be ignored

Before I moved to Hermiston, while I was working for *The Dalles Chronicle*, a co-worker told me an anecdote about a homeless man with an apparent mental illness.

We both knew his name from his near-weekly appearances on the records page of our newspaper, always for some minor charge of disorderly conduct or criminal mischief after making a scene at a local establishment.

He had recently shown up at the regional jail, calmly undressed, and stood naked by the front door until the sheriff walked out, greeted him by name, and said, "Put your clothes back on, we don't have any room for you today."

So he got dressed and went on his way.

I thought of that story a few years later, when a young man with a mental illness showed up at the Hermiston Police Department, smashed a window out, and then asked to be arrested for it.

I don't have all the answers for fixing our country's mental health problems, but there has got to be a better way.

The opening of Aspen Springs, a new 16-bed psychiatric facility in Hermiston, is a positive development. But it took four years to open after Lifeways first broke ground on the project, and it barely makes a dent in replacing the 60 beds that used to be available in Pendleton



Jade McDowell
NEWS EDITOR



HH file photo

Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital in Hermiston has added acute, inpatient psychiatric care to Umatilla County.

before the state shut down the Blue Mountain Recovery Center in 2014.

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely additional help is on the way for our mental health care system any time soon. As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on the economy, the Oregon Legislature and local leaders will have to make cuts across the budget. The planned mental health and addiction-focused renovation of the Umatilla County Jail has already been one of the first casualties.

Full disclosure: My father is a licensed clinical social worker in Oregon, so I do have a personal bias toward advocating for more mental health resources in the state. But that call has been echoed by many of our leaders.

Hermiston Police Department Chief Jason Edmiston has frequently voiced his frustration that there are not more resources for people like those I mentioned above. At the Aspen Springs ribbon cutting, Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer said too many Umatilla County residents were ending up in jail when they should have been receiving treatment at a facility like Aspen Springs instead. During a recent town hall, state Rep. Greg Smith said mental health funding has become a new focus for him as he has gained a better understanding of the scope of the problem.

Acute care for people in the depths of a psychotic episode might be the most obvious place to start, but we also need more resources for our friends and neighbors who are experiencing less severe mental health problems.

Three times since I moved to Hermiston, I have had friends express to me that they were experiencing increasingly intrusive suicidal thoughts. In each case, they have not felt reassured by the options available to people in their situation, who were afraid of what they might do

but had not actually taken action to harm themselves yet.

We also need to make sure that counseling is readily accessible and affordable for people who are experiencing less severe anxiety, depression, grief, addiction or other symptoms.

Unfortunately, this problem goes beyond a funding issue. There is also a shortage of mental health professionals available for hiring. That's one of the reasons that Lifeways took longer than expected to open Aspen Springs, and during the facility's grand opening, Good Shepherd Health Care System CEO Dennis Burke also stated that as Good Shepherd has looked into expanding into behavioral health, the ability to fill positions has been a barrier.

Oregon and its universities have created recruiting and incentive programs for other professions facing shortages in the past. We need similar efforts in behavioral health.

During the pandemic, mental health concerns have often taken a back seat to pressing concerns about physical health. As a state, and as a community, we can't afford to ignore the issue.

If you are experiencing mental health challenges, please seek support from trusted loved ones and professional help as needed. Although our resources in the state are not at an ideal level yet, there is still help available. For a crisis, you can contact Lifeways' crisis line at 541-240-8030 at any time, or for less urgent needs you can call their Hermiston office at 541-567-2536.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stepping Stones will offer a leg up

To the editor:
I moved to Hermiston in 1985 and have been involved in community activities since. One of my blessings has been to be involved with ordained ministry at St. John's Episcopal Church. One of the sorrows came shortly after we moved here and the winter was bitterly cold with lots of snow. This was before Agape House or the Warming Station existed. When we had some homeless person show up on our doorstep we would only be able to fund perhaps a night in a motel. Other places they might go turned their backs.

As I continued to see our homeless population grow through economic downturns, my heart ached. When we formed the Warming Station I became a volunteer. Working more closely with these individuals made me more aware that here were people of worth, not garbage to be discarded or pushed away, out of sight.

I have stepped forward to volunteer to be on the board of the Hermiston Stepping Stones nonprofit. We are working on a solution that mirrors successful efforts of other progressive communities, such as Eugene and Walla Walla. Stepping Stones aims to provide a safe, secure sleeping location for folks (instead of downtown, or on the Oxbow Trail). After establishing a site with "Conestoga" huts for sleeping, Stepping Stones plans to work with other agencies to push homeless folks to rehab, GED, skill training, or whatever they might need as a leg up out of homelessness. When my great-grandparents emigrated west, the country seemed to support a "Golden Rule" approach to life. I think Hermiston has a good heart and can support this mission to support others as we would like to be treated.

Rev. Chuck Barnes
Board member for Hermiston Stepping Stones,
priest at St. John's
Hermiston

Greg Smith a leading light in District 57

To the editor:
In November of 2000, Greg Smith was first elected to represent District 57 in the Oregon State House of Representatives. In the years since then, Greg has demonstrated himself to be honest, positive, and extremely hardworking on behalf of the residents of his constituency. He has shown time and again his dedication to represent well a portion of the state that is often overlooked and not heard. His keen common-sense insight into the strengths and challenges that face his region and his continual can-do attitude sets him apart from others.

Greg is a good listener. He demonstrates a willingness to learn and grow. He has shown time and again that he has not only the desire to lead and represent, but the ability to do so well. Greg has taken a leadership role in the region to help its cities grow and develop. This is especially apparent in Hermiston, as this city has shown strong growth and economic development.

Greg is honest and caring. He has an ongoing concern for people and he carries that concern with him everywhere.

Through the years in which I have known Greg Smith, he has demonstrated leadership skills, personal and public integrity, thoughtfulness and an ability to connect with people of all walks of life. These skills are exactly what we need in a representative for our district in the Oregon State House of Representatives.

I endorse Greg Smith and strongly encourage you to join me in that support as Greg makes his reelection bid as the Oregon State Representative of House District 57.

Cathy Lloyd
Hermiston

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CORRECTIONS

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Please contact the editor at editor@hermistonherald.com or call (541) 564-4533 with issues about this policy or to report errors.

SUBMIT A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters Policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for the Hermiston Herald readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters should be kept to 250 words.

No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. The Hermiston Herald reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content.

Letters must be original and signed by the writer or writers. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. Only the letter writer's name and city of residence will be published.

OBITUARY POLICY

The Hermiston Herald publishes paid obituaries. The obituary can include small photos and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge. Expanded death notices will be published at no charge. These include information about services. Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at hermistonherald.com/obituaryform, by email to obits@hermistonherald.com, by fax to 541-276-8314, placed via the funeral home or in person at the Hermiston Herald or East Oregonian offices. For more information, call 541-966-0818 or 1-800-522-0255, x221.