

UPDATES

UMATILLA COUNTY TO CHANGE MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS

HERMISTON HERALD

Umatilla County's mental health services will undergo a significant change this year as the county brings in a new provider to handle mental health and addiction treatment.

In an administrative meeting on Wednesday, May 26, Umatilla County commissioners voted in agreement with a unanimous recommendation from a five-person committee to award a contract to Community Counseling Solutions as its new mental health and addiction services provider.

"For somebody in crisis, whether they're struggling with mental health, or if they're under the influence of intoxicants, or both, which is usually the case, they're going to get the service they need immediately," said Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer, the county's liaison for mental health.

The committee was composed of an educator, law enforcement staff and county employees. They recommended CCS, a behavioral health provider based in Heppner, over Lifeways, an Ontario-based mental health provider that has served the county for 14 years.

Lifeways plans to protest the county's decision, according to Liz Johnsen, chief operating officer for Lifeways.

The county's own alcohol and drug treatment services cover substance abuse, while Lifeways handled mental health care for the county. But patients in crisis often fall under both categories at once, officials say, at times leaving it unclear which entity should respond to someone in need.

Community Counseling Solutions is going to handle both, starting in September for addiction services and December for mental health.

For more coverage on the decision, see www.hermistonherald.com or www.eastoregonian.com.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Graduates parade down West Highland Avenue in Hermiston for the Hermiston High School Honor Walk on Thursday, May 27, 2021.

End of an unusual year

Graduating seniors celebrate with Honor Walk through town

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

As Hermiston High School seniors lined up in their bright purple graduation robes for a class photo on Thursday, May 27, strong winds whipped through the group, sending some students scrambling for caps or tassels caught in the breeze.

The windy weather was less than ideal for an outdoor event, but if there is one thing the Class of 2021 knows, it is persevering in less-than-ideal circumstances.

Francisco Dinis said he was glad to be graduating after a challenging year. Like his classmates, he had his junior year ended abruptly during the initial COVID-19 shutdowns of March 2020, and when he returned in the fall for his senior year, it was for "comprehensive distance learning" from home for the first semester, before eventually transitioning to hybrid learning in the spring.

"It was hard," he said of distance learning. "Most of my classes I was failing, but once we got back in person I did better."

Despite the tough year, he was able to line up with the rest of his class for the May 27 Honor Walk, a new tradition started the previous year to celebrate graduating seniors in the week before graduation. Students crowded together for a class photo on Kennison Field before heading out for a parade of sorts around the school. Friends, family and other community members cheered them



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

A band member plays the trumpet as the Hermiston High School Marching Band leads the school's Honor Walk through the streets of Hermiston on Thursday, May 27, 2021.

on, sometime holding signs or throwing candy, as they walked down the street in their caps and gowns, led by the marching band.

After graduation, Dinis said he plans to move to California to attend a junior college there.

With Dinis was PricillaMarie Lang, who is planning to pursue a nursing degree at Blue Mountain Community College. She said she was looking forward to spending more time with her family this

summer once she was done with classes.

She said this year it was hard to miss cheerleading, participating in Spirit Week and attending basketball and football games — all activities she loved before the pandemic. Some students actually did better online, because it was easier to manage social anxiety or other problems, she said. So she hopes that for those students, online learning will still

be an option. But Lang disliked online learning and was glad to return to the classroom.

As students showed up for the class photo before the Honor Walk, they were invited to sign their name to a set of posters sitting on tables, with titles like "trade school" or "military," to let people know what their plans were.

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Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

The sun shines through a new entrance sign at the Funland Playground in Hermiston on Thursday, May 27, 2021.

Volunteers get preview of new Funland Playground

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston's shiny new playground got a little shinier last week.

Volunteers from local service clubs and churches descended on Funland Playground on Thursday, May 27, to scrub the construction grime off the play equipment before contractors pour the colorful, rubberized play surface that will run underneath. Once the final touches are added, the playground is expected to have a soft opening sometime in mid-June, with a grand opening celebration on the Fourth of July.

"This is a magical place, and I hope you have fun getting in there

and cleaning everything," Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter told volunteers.

Tom Ditton got straight to work scrubbing the giant vegetables that children will be able to climb on in the farming section of the playground. The section also includes a set of tall plastic slides leading from a tower built to look like a silo, and a tunnel and pipes meant to mimic irrigation infrastructure.

"I've started cleaning this giant hot pepper here, indicating, apparently, that people grow peppers here," Ditton said. "I wasn't sure if they did."

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