



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

**Jara Montez poses for a portrait during a passing period Monday, Oct. 11, 2021, at Umatilla High School in Umatilla. Montez, like other youths, uses social media to connect to friends, yet also feels some platforms hurt her quality of life.**

## Social media troubles teens, increases anxiety, depression, more

By **BRYCE DOLE** and **ERICK PETERSON**  
Hermiston Herald

For Laylah Lucas, it all started with YouTube. At 9 years old, she watched toy reviews on the popular video platform. Then she turned to Pinterest to view other artists' work. Then, in eighth grade, she got a cellphone and felt more independent. So, she started her Instagram account, seeking connection with other teens.

She started spending more and more time on social media. She turned to TikTok, where she fell down rabbit holes, watching video after video. She was hooked. Over time, her mental health suffered.

The Instagram influencers, their perfect lives and bodies, made her feel insecure about her own life and body. She watched videos from her friends and felt she always was missing out. She said she's bisexual, so when threats against



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

**Laylah Lucas, junior at Hermiston High School and advocate for mental health, struggles with depression and anxiety, which she attributes in part to experiences on social media.**

the LGBTQ community spread across social media during Pride month in June, she was terrified.

"That's scary, because you don't know if that's true or a rumor," said Lucas, a 16-year-old Hermiston High School junior who struggles with depression and anxiety. "And that rumor spread like the plague. And that's a lot

of mental bog. Because now you're afraid. Especially if you're like me."

Lucas realized what has long been understood but has reached the national spotlight again in recent weeks: Social media plays a major role in the declining mental health of teens.

"I feel like if you're a teen and you say that you

haven't then you're lying," said Lucas. "It's impossible to not be intimidated or insulted or made to feel bad about yourself because of social media."

### A national dilemma

Recent revelations from Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen and a Wall Street Journal investigation

that sparked national outrage has reinvigorated discussions over how the platforms influence teenage mental health.

The revelations, uncovered through a trove of the company's internal documents, show that leadership among the social media giants knew for years that platforms such as Instagram were having serious effects on the mental well-being of teens — especially young women. Yet the company chose not to disclose that information and has made meager efforts to stop it.

Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D, called Haugen's Senate testimony "a great public service" in revealing how platforms like Facebook and Instagram use private information to manipulate young consumers, a practice he describes as "predatory."

"These are impressionable young people," Wyden told the Hermiston Herald, adding that Facebook is "taking advantage of them."

Wyden, a proponent of digital privacy legislation, is pushing forward the Algorithmic Accountability Act,

which requires that companies audit "high-risk systems" such as artificial intelligence for decisions that contribute to harmful content. The act is meant to curb the spread of misinformation, bias or discrimination, and he said he believes it will attain bipartisan support.

But the activity in Washington D.C., only hints at what teens are experiencing in rural Eastern Oregon. Teens, counselors, school district officials and political figures around Umatilla County said although social media has impacted teenage mental health for years, the toll has worsened during the pandemic. All that has shifted is the question of who's to blame.

### Teens, counselors speak out

"I feel social media has made unrealistic standards for what people should look like or be like," said Jara Montez, a 17-year-old senior at Umatilla High School.

Montez estimated she spends about seven or eight hours a day on social media. She checks the apps between classes. Like Lucas, she

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## Grand openings begin new Umatilla County peer centers

By **ERICK PETERSON**  
Hermiston Herald

Three drop-in peer centers opened Wednesday, Oct. 6, cutting ribbons on a new resource to help people suffering addictions.

The Oregon Washington Health Network centers in Hermiston, Pendleton and Milton-Freewater offer support and guidance from peers. These peers will be able to share their stories and direct people to assistance, whether that help is for addiction recovery or not. Some people may want assistance in making their addictions less problematic, and other people will want aid for dealing with family members who are addicts.

"We want everyone who comes here to feel loved," said Kathleen Pollard, one of the Hermiston center's peer mentors.

Other people at the grand opening shared her sentiment, celebrating the opening with cake and laughter.

Amy Ashton-Williams, the network's executive director, was present at the Hermiston grand opening, which also included Hermiston city officials, OWhN employees and interested health care workers.

"I think this is monumental," Ashton-Williams said, also explaining the centers will be able to offer help, untied to treatment. Services are free, and a good place for people who are troubled and unaware of what to do next.

OWhN has a medical clinic in Pendleton and has offered limited peer mentorship there. Ashton-Williams said the organization has helped around 50 people in the past few months. The offices, with more peers, she said, will be able to serve

even more people.

Hermiston City Councilors Jackie Myers and Doug Primmer joined Ashton-Williams for the ribbon cutting.

"We are very excited for this," Myers said. "This absolutely fills a need that Hermiston has far gone without. Having someone here for those in need and their families is a great service."

Primmer added, based on his experience in law enforcement, he has seen the damage drugs have had on people's lives.

"Having access to this type of thing, this network, is going to help us out," he said, because the centers provide police a resource to direct people to.

Stanfield resident Luis Ibarra is the peer mentor supervisor for all three centers and oversees local operations. He trains peers and

makes sure clients have a positive experience.

As the child of an alcoholic, he said he has a strong feeling for his work. He witnessed domestic violence in his home and abuse. This made him angry and bitter, leading to rebellion and dropping out of high school.

Even when his home life improved, he said he still had anger issues in need of rehabilitation. Now, he intends to help other people with similar problems.

Megan Torres, another peer supervisor, also is working with the centers, going from one to the other, as well as local hospitals. She will direct people with substance use disorder to the peer centers.

She said she is happy with the new centers and grateful for the opportunity to work

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Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

**Doug Primmer and Jackie Myers, Hermiston city councilors, cut a ribbon Oct. 6, 2021, in front of the new Oregon Washington Health Network center in Hermiston. They share the cutting with Amy Ashton-Williams, the network's executive director.**