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New COVID liaison helps promote healthy schools

BY MARCY STAMPER

Although keeping everyone safe and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major emphasis at the school district, it's not the only job of school nurses.

"Just COVID is a full-time job — trying to keep the school open. But there are still regular bumps, bruises and chronic health conditions," school nurse Adriana Vanbianchi said last week.

Now the schools have a dedicated COVID liaison to handle testing and contact tracing and oversee any quarantines. Annelisa Tornberg, who started last week, also communicates with families about potential exposures and ensures they have groceries and other necessities if they are quarantined. She is also the district's liaison with medical providers and public health officials.

"We are providing as many services as possible during a trying time, when students, teachers and families are exhausted and stressed," Tornberg said.

The school district is offering free, voluntary tests every morning for students and staff. Some days, they've given as many as 40 tests.

As Okanogan County saw



Photo by Marcy Stamper

Annelisa Tornberg, the school district's new COVID liaison, left, and School Nurse Adriana Vanbianchi offer free COVID testing every morning for students and staff.

its highest infection rate since the start of the pandemic this

fall—and with the highly contagious Delta variant spread-

ing in the community at large—schools have had more

COVID cases than in the past. In addition, this year, the major-

ity of students are at school for in-person instruction and athletics have resumed, increasing the potential for exposure, Vanbianchi said.

The increased virulence of COVID is naturally reflected at school, although their mitigation measures—including masking, ventilation, and holding lessons and activities outdoors when possible—have minimized transmission, Vanbianchi said.

The school doesn't have an exact tally of infections this year because the recent surge has been particularly widespread and complex. Whenever staff and students are in isolation because they have COVID, it means other young people are in quarantine waiting to see if they're infected. "That's why community prevalence really affects our students," Vanbianchi said.

Students and staff who've been vaccinated generally don't have to quarantine, but they must continue to wear masks and monitor for symptoms. Since masks are required for classes and all other indoor school activities, if someone in a class gets sick, it's generally not considered a close contact for

See COVID, A2

County residents report chronic CenturyLink outages

Say dependable service is essential

BY MARCY STAMPER

Although many people have abandoned them entirely, some in remote areas of Okanogan County still depend on old-fashioned landlines for day-to-day communication, health monitoring, and emergencies.

But for years, people in the lower Methow Valley and in other parts of the county—particularly in isolated, hilly areas with no cell service—have been struggling with chronic outages on their CenturyLink landlines that last days or weeks at a time. The most consistent problems have been in Black Canyon and the Chiliwist.

People who lose service say it's often days before CenturyLink sends out a technician. Many repairs last only until the next rain or snowstorm, they said.

The situation can be especially aggravating because, without phone service at home, these people typically have to drive into town to get a cell signal simply to report the outage.

They describe frustrating hours on hold trying to report a problem and—even more maddening—occasional missed appointments because CenturyLink tried to call to confirm but didn't get through, since the phone was out of order.

Rebecca Meadows lives in one of six houses on Black Canyon Road, about 8 miles

north of Pateros. The remote canyon setting means that cell service is spotty to nonexistent, and many of them have unreliable landlines.

Beyond normal communications, Meadows and her husband have an especially urgent need for their phone, because her husband relies on a heart monitor that's linked to the landline.

The Meadowses have had problems with their landline off and on for several years, but it really got bad in September 2020. From September through March, the phone was out almost every month, for a few days or even a week, Meadows said. Every time it rained or snowed the phone stopped working. Technicians identified a problem in the main underground phone line and said they'd repair it in the spring after the ground thawed.

But the repairs were never made. A couple of weeks ago, the Meadowses lost service again for eight days. The technician found a spot where the main phone line appeared to have been severed when a new fence was installed. The wire, which had been spliced, was draped over the fence, but there was no waterproof tape protecting the repair. The technician redid the splice, taped it up, and submitted an order for a permanent fix, Meadows said.

Chiliwist

In the Chiliwist, Jerry Brannon said he has been pressing CenturyLink to pro-

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FOWL opens the covers on the Winthrop library

More tours this Sunday

BY MARCY STAMPER

Community members got a peek inside the covers of the new Winthrop library, which is holding tours of the building this month.

At 7,300 square feet, the library will be more than six times the size of the current library. The expansive building will allow it to function not only as a library, but also as a community gathering space.

The main area includes dedicated sections for kids, teens and adults; six windows with bench seating; and a living-room area with a fireplace and view of Mount Gardner.

Children get a special section—buffered by a sound barrier—with a nook for reading and exploring and a "messy area." The nook will feature designs of local plants and animals.

The building also features

separate rooms for community gatherings, lectures and activities, and a maker space for things like art projects, 3D printers and sewing machines. The larger library will accommodate a bigger collection—more books, magazines, audio and movies. There will be public computers and printers. The entire facility—including the parking lot—will have free public Wi-Fi.

Friends of the Winthrop Public Library (FOWL) led a tour on Sunday (Oct. 17) that gave people a sense of what it's like in the light-filled, airy space, with its soaring ceiling of wooden beams. "You won't have to trip over arts and crafts supplies to go to the restroom," the tour guides pointed out.

When it's done—opening is projected for late spring 2022—North Central Washington Libraries will move in books and other supplies.

Even the outdoor spaces will

See FOWL, A2



Photo by Marcy Stamper

The new Winthrop library will have a children's nook, and even a "messy area," buffered by a sound barrier.

Modern firearm season open for deer through Oct. 26

Deer populations rebounding in county

BY NATALIE JOHNSON

The modern firearms hunting season for white-tail and mule deer started Saturday (Oct. 16) and will last through Oct. 26 in Okanogan County game management units, where state agencies are predicting strong numbers of both species despite recent fires and drought.

Okanogan County is in hunting district 6 of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), which includes game

management units (GMUs) 203, 204, 209, 215, 218, 224, 231, 233, 239 and 242.

Okanogan County continues to support one of the largest migratory mule deer populations in the state, according to the Washington state Department of Fish and Wildlife's 2021 report on hunting prospects in the district, and GMUs 204 and 215 in particular have large populations of white-tailed deer.

"(The) District 6 deer management objective is for stable to modestly increasing populations within the social tolerance limits for nuisance and damage issues," reads the report, authored by District Wildlife Biologist Scott Fitkin and Assistant District

Wildlife Biologist Jeff Heinen. "Increasing post-season fawn:doe ratios and higher than average over-winter fawn survivorship documented in surveys from the past two years indicate that deer numbers are beginning to rebound in District 6 in the wake of extreme fires, severe droughts and modestly tough winters from the middle part of the last decade. As previously burned winter range continues to recover and mature, this trend is expected to continue."

The WDFW is predicting a "modest" increase in availability of 2.5-year-old bucks, but noted that the district was not able to conduct surveys of

deer populations in 2020 due to COVID-19.

Hunters must have a valid big-game hunting license and a valid modern firearm deer or multi-season tag. Hunters are allowed one deer per license year.

In the 2020 general season, hunters in the district harvested 2,419 deer—2,232 of which were bucks and 187 of which were antlerless—which was up 17% from the previous year.

Effects of fire, drought on hunting season

The WDFW warns that a number of GMUs in Okanogan County, including in the

See HUNTING, A2

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
October 21	October 22	October 23	October 24	October 25	October 26
59°	52°	52°	55°	54°	50°
48°	41°	46°	38°	33°	32°
Cloudy	Cloudy with a Shower	Showers Possible	Afternoon Shower	Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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OUTAGES

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vide reliable service for 26 years. Brannon, a retired electrical engineer, contends that CenturyLink is using a system that's so old that it's hard to find parts and many technicians no longer know how to maintain it.

It's 35 miles to the nearest cell tower, so most people in the isolated community don't get a signal, Brannon said.

Phone problems in the Chiliwist vary. Sometimes people can't dial out; sometimes they don't get incoming calls. Sometimes there is so much static on the line that they can't hear, Brannon said. This July, they had no service for almost the entire month.

The Chiliwist suffered extensive losses in the 2014 Carlton Complex Fire. The community relies on a phone tree so people can be notified in an emergency, Brannon said.

Local technicians have been the saving grace for people who've been dealing with chronic phone outages. In these small communities, residents know the technicians personally, and some have given out their personal phone numbers. "These guys have gone out of their way several times," Meadows said.

CenturyLink's landline network "has had intermittent service disruptions," Kerry Zimmer, who handles corporate communications for CenturyLink, said last month. "We are aware of the problems and are working to repair and actually restore the network," although they don't have an estimated time for completion, she said.

The state Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC), which regulates companies that provide landline service, has investigated the CenturyLink problems based on consumer complaints. Last year, the UTC wrote to Brannon that CenturyLink had determined that they didn't plan permanent upgrades to the facilities that serve the area. The company would "troubleshoot and resolve customer issues on a case-by-case basis," the UTC investigator said.

Since then, CenturyLink has accelerated the schedule and said repairs could be made this fall. A UTC investigator told Brannon last month, "I was able to confirm CenturyLink has ordered the telephone equipment and is now waiting on its delivery. Because of component short-

ages, unfortunately, CenturyLink does not have any expectation of when the parts will be delivered. I assure you I will provide an update as soon as more information becomes available."

A CenturyLink technician was in the Chiliwist early this month taking measurements, Brannon said.

'Like the 21st century stopped'

Chiliwist resident Steve Cockfield has also struggled for years with phone outages.

Some of the problems recall the shared party lines of yore. Sometimes lines get crossed and people get calls intended for a different number. Sometimes other people can hear your conversation when they pick up the phone to make a call. "It's almost like the 21st century stopped," Cockfield said.

"If we didn't short-circuit the system by going directly to the repair person, I don't know if it would ever be fixed," Cockfield said.

Many customers rely on their landlines because of medical issues. "My phone is and had been out AGAIN. It was out for eight days prior to Christmas and was temporarily fixed. I am very ill, and on hospice, I need my home phone in case of an emergency," an Oroville resident said in a complaint to the UTC.

A customer in Okanogan told the UTC, "We are in a rural part of the State with spotty cell service and rely on our land lines. Many of the people affected by this outage are elderly and the service CenturyLink provides is the only way they can call out in an emergency."

911 outages

Earlier this year, people in the Oroville area had a different problem—they couldn't call 911, said Mike Worden, chief deputy of communications with the Okanogan County Sheriff's Office. Although the call would be answered, the 911 dispatchers sometimes didn't hear the caller, Worden said. Usually the caller got through on a second call, or the 911 dispatcher called back and reached the caller. Worden said he wasn't aware of any instances where a caller was unable to report an emergency. If multiple calls don't get through, an officer will go to the scene to check on the situation, Worden said.

Oroville residents and the sheriff's office both complained to the UTC. Ultimately, CenturyLink traced the problem to faulty hardware and repaired it, Worden said.

No dial tone, crossed lines—customers complain to state utilities commission

BY MARCY STAMPER

The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) regulates companies that provide landline service, but not cell service. They investigate complaints to determine if a company violated industry rules, UTC Media and Communications Manager Emilie Brown said.

The Methow Valley News obtained all complaints Okanogan County residents made to the UTC since 2019 through a public records request. There were 46 complaints in all.

The UTC found numerous violations in its investigations into the complaints about CenturyLink. Some violations had to do with technical assistance; others were for failure to make prompt repairs or quality of service. The UTC investigates when there's a widespread outage. They may recommend a fine for each occurrence of a violation, Brown said.

The nature of the complaints varied. Some people couldn't make or receive any calls; some only had local or long-distance service. Some people could only dial one or two neighbors. Some got a busy signal or no dial tone. And sometimes the static was so loud the person couldn't hear the call.

UTC regulations require that phone companies restore service within two days. In many instances, the UTC fined CenturyLink because it took longer to restore service. The UTC complaint files show that CenturyLink typically refunded customers for the days without service.

Two dozen complaints were submitted by customers in Oroville, where there was a widespread outage just before Christmas 2020. CenturyLink found that the problem had been caused by faulty equipment in Tonasket owned by another telecommunications company. Technicians from the two companies restored the service six days after the outage was reported.

The UTC got an earful from people in the Chiliwist. This July, one customer experienced ongoing frustration with crossed lines, meaning they

got calls meant for their neighbor but couldn't place outbound calls. CenturyLink dispatched a technician, but the technician couldn't locate their address using mapping software, the company said. The UTC consumer program specialist looked up the customer's address and sent it to CenturyLink, hoping it would help the technician find the house.

The customer was exasperated. "URGENT help requested. I just spent over an hour speaking to everyone I could at Century Link. They told me there was not a repair ticket even open. How can that be? We have been working... on this outage now for over 2 weeks and have had multiple repairs in the last several months," they wrote to the UTC.

"First we had no tone, again, then dial tone was on and off, then three days ago we got a dial tone but the technicians connect our line with our neighbors line so we can call out but incoming calls to our number get still get a busy signal. Now we continue to get the neighbors calls," the customer said.

The outages occurred during this summer's wildfires. "Please help resolve this issue before a fire takes our community and before someone is trapped, injured, or dies," the customer said in the complaint.

CenturyLink determined that a thunderstorm had damaged several repeaters and credited the customer for \$16.45 for five days without service and three days with a hum on the line.

A customer in Winthrop complained that the CenturyLink technician went to the wrong address. The customer had to drive 10 miles to report the missed appointment. "The customer has no way to communicate with CenturyLink from his home; however, CenturyLink has refused to come out without speaking with him on the day of his appointment," the UTC investigator wrote in the complaint summary.

Another widespread outage affected residents and town government in Condonally last October and November. The mayor reported that the town is often without phone service for days at

a time. He said CenturyLink told him that no local technicians were able to fix the problem. Ultimately, a technician came from Spokane and repaired the high-voltage system, the UTC investigator said.

Mazama residents Jason Paulsen and Valerie Potts had a unique problem, which they described in a complaint to the UTC in 2019 after their voice-mail service was out for more than three weeks, despite five calls to CenturyLink. After being contacted by the UTC, the phone company changed some settings that restored the service.

Paulsen was among the many complainants who said the people handling service calls for CenturyLink staff were ineffective. "Those handling the calls appear almost inept in their fielding of the complaint, to the point that on several occasions their mental capacity is reasonably questioned," Paulsen said in the complaint.

In an interview last week, Paulsen said they filed the complaint after CenturyLink would fix one problem, only to create a new one. "Once the UTC got involved, everything snapped into shape quite quickly. I found them to be extraordinarily effective," Paulsen said.

In addition to detailing the variety of outages, the complaints to the UTC reveal the exasperation of CenturyLink customers.

One Oroville customer explained a theory about why CenturyLink didn't grasp the extent of the Christmas-time outage there. "The tech said that I was the only one who had a call into CenturyLink about this. At first I thought... how is this possible. And then I realized it is because it takes over an hour of wait time to get someone on line with CenturyLink. NO EXAGGERATION. How many people are going to do that?" the person said in the UTC complaint.

In the past five years, the majority of complaints to the UTC about telecommunications companies have been about CenturyLink—from 57% to 67% of the total, statewide. Frontier Communications was the subject of one-quarter of the complaints; all other companies had just a handful.

NEWS BRIEFS

CANNABIS MORATORIUM STAYS PUT; DEADLINE EXTENDED

An Okanogan County moratorium on new cannabis farms and the expansion of existing farms will stay in place so the commissioners and Planning Department can review regulations, including the number of grows that can be on a single parcel.

But the commissioners extended the deadline for growers to meet with the planning director to present their license and site plan so the county can be sure they're in compliance. The new deadline is Feb. 15, 2022, instead of Jan. 1.

The commissioners heard testimony from three cannabis producers, all opposed to the moratorium, at their public hearing on Monday (Oct. 18). No one submitted written comment.

The producers said that the

hearing and comment period conflict with the harvest, their busiest time of year.

In the two months since growers were notified that they must meet with the county, only three growers have come in, Okanogan County Planning Director Pete Palmer said.

The county enacted the moratorium because the state has been issuing multiple licenses on the same parcel, as well as licenses that don't link to any viable parcel, Palmer said. Producers also need a permit from the county. While the state has issued 125 licenses, the county has only 82 permits on record, Palmer said.

The county also wants to ensure that cannabis operations are compatible with neighboring property uses, Palmer said.

The moratorium is in effect through Feb. 24, 2022. The county will use the time to

draft regulations in consultation with growers and county residents.

MEDICARE OPEN ENROLLMENT ONGOING THROUGH DEC. 7

The Medicare Open Enrollment Period this year is scheduled for Oct. 15 through Dec. 7, and is a time when people can enroll, switch plans, or join a Part D drug plan.

The Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors program is a part of the state Office of the Insurance Commissioner, and can provide one-on-one counseling and support over the phone or through video.

For more information, go to <https://www.insurance.wa.gov>.

THIRD-PARTY MAPS DUE TO REDISTRICTING COMMISSION

The Washington State Redistricting Commission is accepting third-party alternate maps of legislative and congressio-

nal districts, which should be submitted by Friday (Oct. 22) to ensure full consideration, according to the commission.

The redistricting commission convenes every 10 years, following the federal census, to explore whether legislative or congressional district lines need to be redrawn to ensure each has a roughly equal population and fair representation.

The commission released its proposed maps earlier this month. They are required to deliver their final recommendation to the state Legislature by Nov. 15.

MV NORDIC TEAM

Register for the Methow Valley Nordic team and learn about the upcoming season via Zoom on Monday (Oct. 25), starting at 5:30 p.m. Email sam@mvnsef.org for the link. Find more information at www.methowvalleynordic.org. Programs are available for ages 6-18; financial aid is available at all levels.





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