

Oregon City High reopens health clinic

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After budget cuts forced a closure last spring, the high school should be back to a full-time nurse practitioner in March

By TOM QUINN
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OREGON CITY — Students in need of free medical care caught a break last week when Oregon City High School reopened its health clinic, closed since spring because of state budget cuts.

The reopening, which comes after the state and Clackamas County resumed financial backing, means the 2,200-student school now has a nurse practitioner in the building several days a week who can treat everything from acne to depression.

"It's very exciting," Principal Carol Kemhus said. "It's not uncommon for us in one week to send two or more students to the hospital for injuries, seizures, asthma attacks. So having someone here on site is such a relief for us."

Since school started in September,

students have relied on the district's one nurse for health care needs, as well as a secretary trained in first aid. During that period, students have logged more than 3,500 visits in search of care. With the clinic closed, that often meant a phone call home for parents to retrieve their child.

If all goes according to plan, by March the clinic will be staffed by a full-time nurse practitioner. There are plans to expand treatment options to include more extensive mental health care.

The clinic is a partnership of the county, the state Department of Human Services and the Oregon City School District.

The only one of its kind in the county, the clinic is part of a network of 44 school-based health clinics tucked inside public elementary, middle and high schools around the state. Often, they are the only place poor or uninsured students can get medical attention and advice.

After 15 years of operation, Oregon City's clinic closed last spring. State contributions to its \$90,000 annual budget

Please see **HEALTH**, Page B2

Health: Nurse practitioner back getting clinic up and running

Continued from Page B1

eroded from more than \$50,000 a year to about \$30,000.

Marina Stansell, director of the county's public health division, was told not to expect any state money for 2003-04, "which is why we had to close the clinic down — we couldn't carry the entire ball," she said.

Six other school-based clinics also closed because of cuts in state funding. All but two have reopened.

Compounding the pain of the closing was that the new Oregon City High School, which opened in September, was designed and built with an expanded clinic in mind. The new facilities, including a lab, exam rooms, offices, bath-rooms and four-bed resting area, sat largely unused until last week.

Reps. Dave Hunt, D-Milwaukie,

and Laurie Monnes-Anderson, D-Gresham, succeeded in August in getting the Legislature to restore more than \$2 million in funding to 20 clinics this biennium. They also received assurances the money would be shielded from any cuts due to Measure 30's failure.

But by the time the state restored its share of the money, the county had pulled its support. And Jackie Rose, the nurse practitioner who ran Oregon City's clinic for more than 10 years, had retired.

A first step in getting the clinic restarted was getting Rose unretired. The 55-year-old returned on contract, but she won't be resuming her duties as a nurse practitioner. Instead, she's written a grant proposal to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, looking for future operating money for state clinics.

She also took out photo albums of the clinic when it was housed in the high school's old Jackson campus. She's been using the images to recreate the clinic, from eye charts to scalpel drawers, in the new school.

Hunt called the clinic's reopening a piece of great news for students amid a lot of bad news.

For Rose, restarting the clinic means time away from her 5-acre garden in Washougal, Wash. But she considers the sacrifice to improve student health to be worthwhile.

"I'm an eternal optimist — I knew it would come back," she said. "I intended to keep working on it, and I intend to keep working on it, because it's so important to kids."

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