

Looking to the Future, Lincoln County Public Health and Olalla Center Build Resiliency in Youth

From Pandemic Response to Tobacco Prevention Programs, Young People in Lincoln County Get Whole Person Care for Building Emotionally Healthy Lives in Stressful Times

The partnership between Lincoln County Public Health (LCPH) and the Olalla Center, a community-based organization that supports youth mental health, goes back a long way. The last three years, though, brought the partners together with a new sense of urgency as they responded to COVID-19, the wildfires of 2020, and Mpox. Now, the organizations are turning their focus back toward daily operations with community and youth resilience at the top-of-mind. By offering clinical support, healthy role models, and resources to build emotional resiliency, the organizations recognize that young people can establish patterns and behaviors that will support them during future stressful events – and there’s plenty of room for creativity along the way.



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Finding health on a horse —or a surfboard

To understand the partnership, it's important to know a bit about the Olalla Center's unique approach. When most people think of preventive care, they might envision screenings for tuberculosis, diabetes, or high blood pressure. At Olalla, preventive care might look like surfing, kayaking, creative arts, bird-watching, hiking with a mentor or learning to work with a horse.

In addition to traditional mental health services including psychiatric day treatment and outpatient mental health services, Olalla's programming includes active, nature-focused activities and prioritizes cultural responsiveness, offering services and activities in English, Spanish and Mam (a Mesoamerican language originating in the region now known as Guatemala).

"We're breaking down the barriers of in-the-box thinking," said Dee Teem, community health and development director at Olalla, "and implementing services in innovative, person-centered, culturally responsive ways to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the communities we serve." Olalla's approach not only addresses a young person's physical and emotional health but the environment surrounding them. Kids and teens learn practical skills, engage in physical activity, and also benefit from time in nature, social connection and healthy adult role models **"Here at Olalla, the common threads across programs are whole person health, nature connection, and community,"** said Teem. **"We try to interweave these threads of support through all we do."**

Through group activities in nature, kids have time to practice emotional self-regulation and work toward treatment goals out in the natural world, supported by trained staff. Bolstered by a supportive environment where they see healthy coping mechanisms modeled by mentors, Olalla's youth may need lower levels of care down the road.



Olalla and LCPH invest in the future

Coping skills and emotional regulation are necessary throughout life. After the COVID-19 response, Olalla and LCPH are continuing their close collaboration, with funding from the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) in recent years for commercial tobacco prevention and adolescent health. **“What I love so much about Olalla’s work is they’re looking at the whole person,”** Sara Herd, a health education specialist at LCPH, explained. **“The whole body, the whole environment.”**

The whole person approach is highlighted especially in Olalla’s commercial tobacco prevention efforts. Olalla provides education on tobacco prevention, but their larger goal is to help address the factors that might push a teen toward tobacco use in the first place. “In times of stress and anxiety, instead of turning to vaping, they can use the skillsets and tools that Olalla is providing,” Herd said. OHA funding has increased Olalla’s capacity to offer programming to kids and teenagers who don’t have a clinical need for mental health care, to support their development of emotional skills, and establish robust systems of support. Herd added, “This funding is allowing us to really go upstream and prevent the need for services later on in their lives.”

Through the broad range of services and activities Olalla provides, a common thread is clear—meet communities where they are. Teem and Herd agree that building a public health system that works for everyone means letting go of pre-conceived ideas of what healthcare looks like.

“We want people to know that ‘we see you, we hear you,’” said Herd. **“We’re here for you. Everybody in Lincoln County matters, and this partnership allows us to honor that.”**

COVID-19 brought new challenges to communities in Lincoln County. Lincoln County Public Health and Olalla Center teamed up to take them on.

To onlookers, the COVID-19 vaccination clinics co-hosted by LCPH and Olalla looked like community celebrations.

“Our vaccine events were fun – like mini-cultural festivals,” said Dee Teem, Olalla’s community health and development director. Sara Herd, a health education specialist at LCPH, mimed a dance move through the screen. Both women broke into smiles as they recalled the 2021 and 2022 COVID-19 vaccine clinics.

Teem and Herd agreed that their organizations’ collaboration on COVID-19 set a blueprint for future public health partnerships and disaster responses.

“Having those trusted relationships was essential,” said Teem. **“They were not just vaccine events. Our health workers were creating community – welcoming people to communicate in their own languages, creating safe spaces where people feel comfortable and accepted.”**

Some of the most successful vaccine clinics took place outside a Mexican grocery store, with free food and musical performances.

“The County provided vaccines, and Olalla’s team provided interpretation, and cultural connection with the community,” Teem explained.