When the Doctor is Out

As hospitals close and country doctors pack up their bags, communities search for a new prescription to keep people — and towns — healthy.
Connor Smith, 12, is examined by Charley Marshall, LVN, at the Dos Palos Memorial Rural Health Clinic in Dos Palos, California, where the hospital closed due to financial problems. MICHAEL MCCOLLUM

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Editor’s note

It’s all about access

The allure of endless skies, vast tracts of land and delicious solitude has drawn people to the American West since the days when covered wagons constituted innovative technology. Self-reliance and access to the outdoors remain entrenched in the ethos of rural Western life. Love thy neighbor, sure, but also cherish the ability to escape him, to vanish into the hills or fields when the spirit catches you. Seclusion is a perk.

Too often, however, the epic distances and luxurious privacy that make the rural West so appealing impede the provision of health care. People who could see a doctor immediately in a city find themselves driving hours for basic services. The need for emergency care necessitates life-saving helicopter flights that cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Rural counties struggle to attract top-notch doctors, nurses, physician assistants and other providers, and the grinding poverty that pervades many remote areas bankrupts hospitals and clinics — even as it contributes to more, and more serious, illnesses and injuries. Access to mental and behavioral healthcare is particularly lacking. According to the National Rural Health Association, men — and, increasingly, women — in rural areas suffer far higher suicide rates than their urban counterparts.

In New Mexico and Colorado, these interrelated challenges are particularly vexing. In 2015, America’s Health Rankings rated New Mexico 37th in overall health nationwide — a four-spot downgrade from its 2014 performance. The data are especially troubling at a granular level: The state ranked 40th nationally in diabetes rates, 43rd in the percent of children living in poverty, and 49th in violent crime. Even worse, New Mexico has just one primary care provider for every 1,099 residents, far below the national average.

Over the past several months, High Country News has worked in collaboration with the Solutions Journalism Network and six news organizations to produce stories of change in rural communities in Colorado and New Mexico. In this issue, this “Small towns, big change” project tackles health care — both the challenges created by lack of access, and the people and institutions striving to bridge the gaps.

You’ll read about hospital closures in California’s Central Valley, as well as New Mexico’s burgeoning “telestroke” program, a promising new approach that allows doctors to care for stroke patients in local hospitals rather than flying them to Albuquerque. You’ll also read about a rural medical network in the state that is increasing the purchasing power of cash-strapped hospitals. You’ll travel to Alamosa, Colorado, where a so-called “Crisis Living Room” is treating mental health patients without costly and counterproductive trips to the emergency room.

Explore the West’s rural health challenges with “Small towns, big change,” both in this issue and online at hcn.org. May you read them in good health.

— Ben Goldfarb, Project editor, Solutions Journalism Network/High Country News
Moments later, the vehicles were engulfed in flames. The Blue Cut Fire races toward a camper and a pickup near Devore, California, in mid-August. 

Mark Jaffe

Less clear.

A study showing that an expansion could save the West’s new reality: Wildfire season is longer and more volatile than ever, thanks to climate change. Wildfire seasons in the Northwest and Southwest now overlap, straining shared national wildfire resources and making fires more difficult to manage. This year, drought-ridden Southern California has suffered the worst. Fires had ripped through tens of thousands of acres in the state by the first week of June. Prolonged drought and the above-average rainfall during El Niño that dried up this summer have created a buildup of wildfire fuel. The most explosive fire so far has been the Blue Cut Fire in San Bernardino County, which burned at an unprecedented rate, destroying 37,000 acres and hundreds of structures, and forcing over 80,000 people to evacuate.

LYNDSEY GILPIN and TAY WILES
MORE: hcne.ws/west-wildfires and hcne.ws/cajon-pass

90 number of wolves from Alaska’s Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve killed by state wildlife officials since 2005.

13 number of those killed that were radio-collared and being monitored by the feds.

28 number of radio-collared “Judas” wolves used by the state to help locate and kill other wolves.

Documents made public in August revealed that the National Park Service ended its decades-long wolf study in Alaska’s Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve because so many wolves had been killed by the state’s Department of Fish and Game. Three wolf packs were eliminated, and five were reduced to a single wolf each. The state says it’s limiting the predators to allow for healthy caribou and moose herds, which some Alaskans rely on for sustenance. Meanwhile, in Denali National Park, the famous East Fork wolf pack has disappeared.

ANNA V. SMITH MORE: hcne.ws/wolfstudy-end

“Consequently, the 2016 Conservation Strategy will remain in effect indefinitely … to facilitate and assure continued successful management of the population and its habitat across multiple land ownerships and jurisdictions.”

–The Interior Department, in its preliminary ruling on Yellowstone grizzly bears. In May, the Yellowstone states submitted a letter arguing that the ruling gives the feds too much power, and objecting in particular to the use of “indefinitely” or “in perpetuity.” The letter states: “There are references to requirements that transcend the ESA’s authority and are unduly prescriptive for management … contrary to Congress’ delineation between federal authority under the ESA and traditional state wildlife management authority.”

Gloria Dickie MORE: hcne.ws/grizzlies-safeguard

Real-time energy prices in the Midcontinent Independent System Operator footprint, as seen on their locational marginal pricing (LMP) contour map. Energy traders can watch for the purples and dark blues, which indicate lowest prices, while orange to red are higher. SCREENSHOT MISOENERGY.ORG

Trending

Biking in wilderness bill

For months, a pending bill that would open wilderness to mountain bikes has divided the outdoor recreation community. The bill, introduced by Utah Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch and Mike Lee, would give federal and local officials two years to determine which areas should remain bike-free. In an opinion piece, John Kelley writes that the timeline is unrealistic, given the necessary environmental reviews, and that advocates falsely “obfuscate any difference between walking and riding.” He says the bill runs counter to the original Wilderness Act’s promise to protect landscapes from “growing mechanization.”

JOHN KELLEY

You say

Gary F. Lehr
“The wording of the Wilderness Act is pretty clear. No mechanical advantage.”

Patrick J. Cusick
“The bike restrictions in the Wilderness Act hit us pretty hard in southwest Idaho last year, when a wilderness designation in the Boulder-White Clouds cut us out of an iconic mountain biking trail.”

Michel Johnson
“Read the wilderness restrictions and know there are millions of equally beautiful miles of national forest where all manner of use is welcome. The wilderness areas are small in comparison. Protection is not discriminatory and vilifying other users is not the answer.”

MORE: hcne.ws/smokescreeen-wild and Facebook.com/highcountrynews

A renewable-friendly grid?

In much of the country, energy traders rely on high-tech price monitoring and computerized markets (example at right). But in the West, the market is stuck in the 1980s. There’s no central place to find prices and send electricity through the grid where it’s needed, where other regions have cohesive grids, the West has 38 separate markets. An expanded Western grid could boost renewables by allowing trading across state lines and preventing waste. In July, a California wholesale energy entity released a study showing that an expansion could save the state as much as $1.5 billion in electricity costs by 2030. The implications for the rest of the West are less clear.

Mark Jaffe MORE: hcne.ws/space4renewables
LETTERS

DANGERS OF PRIVATIZING PARKS

What will areas administered by the National Park Service become (HCN, 8/22/16)? Will the enormous shortage of congressional appropriations undermine a century of relative stability? Fifty years ago, massive infrastructure improvements were made under a program called Mission 66, but no such program has existed since. Congress got in the habit of not fulfilling appropriations requests — there were wars to be fought — yet use of the parks expanded. Very quickly, the Park Service realized it could sort of get the work done with volunteers. As that program grew, Congress seems to have regarded the success of volunteerism as a substitute for appropriations. Into this vacuum of congressional support, corporate and private stewardship is stepping. Some years ago, a major motor vehicle manufacturer funded the restoration of Glacier National Park’s red buses. Subaru is very visible in its support this region’s diverse natural and human communities.

GEOLOGY OF POWER

In Paige Blankenbuehler’s article on Diablo Canyon in your Aug. 22 issue, I was surprised that there was no mention that this nuclear station is located near the San Andreas fault. A few decades ago, I was staunchly opposed to nuclear power. After becoming aware of the contribution of fossil fuel–burning power plants to climate change, my opinion began to shift. The French produce around 80 percent of their power with nuclear and have a stellar safety record. They even recycle and use spent fuel from other countries.

After the tsunami hit Japan, I was amazed to learn that they had such a huge nuclear station on islands that are part of the Pacific Ring of Fire. In any areas that are considered to be geologically stable, I now believe that nuclear power can be an excellent “bridge” to the future. Maybe we should consider the common sense of how our power needs to be produced based on location. I vote to sell Japan natural gas from Colorado, rather than have radioactive materials wash up on my favorite Oregon beaches. And, who decided to build the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Station near a major fault zone?

David Poling
Grand Junction, Colorado

BURNTING QUESTIONS

I feel that Jane Braxton Little told a very incomplete story of how fire danger relates to beetle-killed trees (“Forest fatalities,” HCN, 8/8/16). Granted, after the needles have fallen off beetle-killed trees, they are less susceptible to forest fires than live trees, but the process of needles falling off takes about four years. Then, about 20 years later, when dead branches and tops start falling out, the forest enters another very flammable period. So, yes, there is a period following beetle epidemics when forests are less flammable, but on either side of it there is a period of higher fire danger. Braxton Little accurately reported what a few scientists have to say about flammability of beetle-killed trees, while ignoring the work of many others on this subject. I looked up what the Rocky Mountain Research Station of the U.S. Forest Service has to say: Dead needles have 10 times less moisture than green ones, ignite four times faster, and increase the risk of spotting ahead of the fire. There is a tendency among environmentalists to embrace the science that supports a “no harvest, no management” alternative. This seems to be that.

John Marshall
Wenatchee, Washington

REAPPORTMENT, HAWAIIAN STYLE

Your June 13 issue reminded me of my years on Hawaii, where, despite the good intentions of the Bishop Estate’s huge land distribution, the powers that be created conditions similar to what you describe in the present Navajo system (“Disenfranchised in Utah,” HCN, 6/13/16).

Bishop lands were in trust, to be divided in half for each succeeding Native Hawaiian generation, provided that the recipient can trace his ancestry back and still has 51 percent Native blood. But given the wonderful “melting pot” cultures, stretching back to Asian cane-worker imports and subsequent interracial marriages, very few such “pure” lineages still exist. The sad result is that the administrators of trust lands are enriching themselves at the expense of the intentions of Mrs. Bishop’s will, created for the sole purpose of helping impoverished, disenfranchised peoples regain control of what had been taken away from them by the white hoole landowners in less than a century.

Robert (“Lopaka”) Cross
Former editor, California Life Magazine

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Right now, in the Black River south of Carlsbad, New Mexico, rare Texas hornshell mussels are trying to multiply. It’s a bizarre and complicated process. Male mussels spit sperm into the river, where the females catch it. After brooding fertilized eggs for about a month, they chuck the larvae into the water, too. There, the would-be mussels hope to be eaten by certain kinds of fish, attaching to their gills and forming parasitic cysts. Then they develop into juveniles before cutting loose from the fish and wriggling to the river bottom, where they can live for up to 20 years.

Texas hornshells are native to the Pecos and Rio Grande basins of southern New Mexico and Texas, where they help maintain water quality by filtering out sediment and other particulates. They’re the only surviving species of New Mexico’s eight native mussels, and the stretch of river near Carlsbad is one of their last strongholds.

Their troubles are nothing new, though. In 1989, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service classified the Texas hornshell as a candidate for the endangered species list, but it had too little information about them to support listing. In 2001, after studies showed that the mollusks were being harmed by low flows in rivers and water pollution, the agency decided protection was justified. But it still couldn’t list them because too many other, higher-priority species also needed protection. Now, the mussel’s time may have finally come: In August, the agency proposed listing it as endangered.

Most species that have landed on the endangered species list in recent years got there when they did as a result of litigation by green groups, and the Texas hornshell mussel is no exception. Almost no one is happy with this pattern, though. “If the Service is simply responding to lawsuits, it’s not being very strategic,” or necessarily focusing on the plants and animals in greatest need, says Ya-Wei Li, an endangered species expert with Defenders of Wildlife. So Fish and Wildlife is now working to reform its process for listing species.

It has proposed prohibiting so-called “mega-petitions,” where environmental groups ask the agency to protect up to hundreds of species at a time, and it recently finalized a new five-tier system for prioritizing decisions on petitions. First in line are species that data clearly show are critically imperiled. Lower down are species for which states are already developing conservation plans, as well as species the agency lacks data on.

The agency simply can’t keep up with all the petitions it gets to list species, says Fish and Wildlife spokesman Brian Hires. Environmentalists filed petitions on behalf of 1,230 species between 2007 and 2010, enough to almost double the number protected by the Endangered Species Act over the previous 30 years. The overwhelmed agency rarely meets its own deadlines for responding, and so environmentalists often sue in response.

The mussel is one of 757 species included in a 2011 legal settlement with the Center for Biological Diversity, in which the agency agreed to deadlines for clearing its considerable backlog. “The states have been frustrated, because we feel like litigation shouldn’t drive conservation,” says Nick Wiley, vice president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Wiley says states — the feds’ main partners in endangered species work — are generally pleased with the planned reforms, which they hope will help them prioritize their own data collection and conservation work. Some environmental groups are also supportive. “This is a very good move for the Service to take control of its own destiny,” says Li. But others argue that the reforms could consign at-risk wildlife to bureaucratic purgatory. “It creates excuses for ongoing delays in decisions on whether species should be protected,” says Tierra Curry, senior scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity. She fears that lower-priority species will slip closer to extinction while they wait for conservation plans or studies that could bump them up in line.

The system also “biases decisions towards popular and well-studied species,” she says, mainly birds and mammals. But some of the most imperiled groups are also the least studied — freshwater mollusks, for instance. The fact that we understand the outlines of the Texas hornshell’s lifecycle makes it fairly unusual among mollusks, Curry notes: For many of the creatures, basic population data doesn’t even exist.

Mussels, snails and insects may well get shortchanged under the new system, Li says. In a perfect world, Fish and Wildlife would be flush with funding, and wouldn’t need to prioritize. “Nobody likes to make those judgment calls,” he says. But relative to the number of species it’s charged with saving, the agency’s funding is decreasing, not increasing, he points out. One way or another, “there are going to be species that come out ahead, and some that fall behind.” —

Contributing editor Cally Carswell writes from Santa Fe, New Mexico. @callycarswell

Endangered species triage
Buried in petitions to list new species, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposes a system for prioritizing

BY CALLY CARSWELL

THE LATEST

Backstory
Three of the nation’s largest coal companies, Peabody Energy, Alpha Natural Resources and Arch Coal, filed for bankruptcy this year. All three are self-bonding, meaning that rather than posting cash or bonds up front to restore damaged land and water sources, they promised to pay after the mining was finished. Now they may lack the funds to cover their reclamation responsibilities, potentially leaving taxpayers stuck with billions of dollars in cleanup bills (“Coal company bankruptcies jeopardize reclamation,” HCN, 1/25/16).

Followup
In early August, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement released its first-ever policy advisory, warning state regulators against letting more companies self-bond. It also promised to tighten self-bonding rules to ensure that companies can cover the costs of reclaiming disturbed land. The agency says it plans to evaluate the energy market and a company’s financial state before approving self-bonds, and may create incentives to encourage timely reclamation.

ANNA V. SMITH
Climate correspondent

Seven decades of recording the weather in New Mexico

BY BRYCE GRAY

In many households, 6 p.m. means dinnertime. But for 89-year-old Anna Mae Wright and her family, that hour marks another daily routine, stretching back more than seven decades: “Weather-reading time.”

Since the late 1940s, each evening Wright has faithfully documented the temperature, precipitation and other meteorological data outside her home near Redrock in southwestern New Mexico, using equipment installed by the National Weather Service. Over the years, the recording process has become a staple of daily life, fit in alongside tending the garden’s tomato plants, crocheting and knitting, and sending her four kids to school — at first in Redrock, a tiny, unincorporated outpost on a remote stretch of the Gila River, and later, 30 miles away in Lordsburg, after the local school closed due to low enrollment.

Wright began the ritual with her husband, Ralph, recording the 24-hour highs and lows and other readings on their 320-acre farm and mailing monthly reports to the National Weather Service. Since Ralph’s death in 1997, she has carried on the tradition mostly alone, sometimes helped by her 60-year-old son, Bill Wright. She now ranks as the West’s longest-serving member of the Weather Service’s Cooperative Observer Program, a network of more than 9,000 volunteers nationwide.

“The rural folks, they’re the most interested,” says Frank Kielnecker, a Weather Service employee in the regional office that Wright reports to. “I’ve never had to call her and say, ‘What’s the deal? You’re not reporting on time.’”

Although she has accumulated many awards honoring her decades of public service, Wright says she does not spend much time reflecting on her achievements. “I feel proud,” she says. “It gives me a sense of self-worth, I guess.” Her son takes pride in her dedication but sees it as entirely natural, since farmers and ranchers like them “tend to be interested in the weather anyway.”

Though their work remains largely anonymous, the cooperative observers are providing crucial information about global climate change. The crowd-sourced approach allows for precise data to be gathered from far-flung corners of the West, such as Redrock, and — in cases like Wright’s — provides a continuous record for which there’s no substitute.

“It’s a long-term climate record at some very remote locations,” says Kielnecker, making it especially valuable to researchers who typically consider even 30 years a suitable window to examine climate trends. The records collected by volunteers make a difference on a local level as well, forming the most comprehensive daily source of temperature and precipitation readings. Short-term forecasts and even warnings for severe weather are often based on observer data, which are uploaded to the National Climatic Data Center in Asheville, North Carolina, each month, and entered into a massive database that’s available to the public.

Wright’s routine has rarely varied over the years, although she no longer sends in written monthly reports. In 2006, she started submitting information by computer, after the Weather Service outfitted her with the appropriate equipment.

While her rhythm has remained constant, regional data show that the climate itself seems to be shifting on her watch. Average annual temperatures in the Weather Service’s Southern Desert Climate District of New Mexico reflect a steady climb, with the five warmest years all occurring since 2000 — including the sweltering years of 2014 and 2015. Yearly averages over the last 15 years have regularly been higher than those observed from 1901 to 2000, often by at least two degrees.

Unfortunately, weather observers like Wright are becoming increasingly rare, says Kielnecker, as rural communities lose population and fewer people maintain a lasting attachment to the land. “People don’t stick around anymore in a rural place as long as Ms. Wright has,” Kielnecker says, noting that participation in the Cooperative Observer program has tapered off in southern New Mexico.

But the steady stream of data from Redrock shows no signs of slowing down. Wright is still making meticulous notes about everything she observes from her ranch house — rain, snow, sleet, lightning, hail. Her son, Bill, has taken over the family farm and says he’ll also take over weather-recording duties whenever her career draws to a close.

That could be a while, yet. “I think I’ll stay with it as long as they want me to, as long as I’m able to,” says Wright. “I like it.”

Anna Mae Wright checks the weather each day, then records data like temperature, precipitation and snow depth. On Aug. 19, the high temperature was 92 degrees Fahrenheit and the low was 57, with no precipitation. JAY HEMPHILL
More fires, fewer fighters

Alaska's emergency wildfire crews are burning out

By Gloria Dickie

Snow machines tow caribou-hide toboggans across the Arctic landscape on a clear March morning. In the distance, sled dogs yelp in chorus, surrounded by shivering visitors from the Arctic Council, here to watch dogsledding, an Alaskan pastime. It's just 10 degrees out, but all Ed Alexander can talk about is how warm it's been. So warm, he says, that wildfires started in February.

Wildfire is part of life in Alaska's rural interior. During summer, it's not uncommon for more than 2,000 lightning strikes to touch down in a single day, igniting the dry, hot lowlands. Emergency Firefighter Type 2 crews, consisting primarily of local Alaskan Natives, typically serve as the first line of defense against conflagrations. “Most people here have fought wildfire in some form throughout their lives,” says Alexander, who served eight years with the Denali Hotshots and is now the Yukon Flats Center coordinator at the University of Alaska. Yet more and more would-be-firefighters are seeking economic opportunities elsewhere, leaving remote villages vulnerable to wildfires made more intense by climate change. Many wonder how much longer Native villagers can be protected from flames and smoke before they're forced to flee for good — a new wave of climate refugees.

Alexander is based out of Fort Yukon, an Alaska Native village, population 600, at the junction of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers, about 145 miles northeast of Fairbanks. It epitomizes the challenges facing local communities.

Lately, lightning strikes have been starting in April, roughly two months ahead of time. Lightning ignites most fires here, and climate change has made the area increasingly flammable — since 1949, Alaska has warmed by about 3.5 degrees Fahrenheit. The fire season has grown by about four days per decade, and the state recently moved the official start date from May to April. Last year, more than 5.1 million acres burned, second only to 2004, when fires blackened 6.6 million acres in the Frontier State.

The fires have come perilously close to villages, where escape by road is often impossible. Bush pilots have spoken about the difficulties in getting people out in the wake of thick smoke, and last summer, residents of Nulato, downriver from Fort Yukon, had to evacuate by boat when fire threatened their community.

This remoteness makes first responders — the Type 2 EFF crews — even more essential. With close ties to the land and each other, Native crews are “a little bit more dialed in on everything from weather patterns to bear-proofing fire camps,” says Matt Kilgriff, the Bureau of Land Management’s Galena Zone EFF coordinator. Alaska’s fuels and terrain are different from the Lower 48’s, and that gives locals the upper hand over hotshots in unfamiliar territory. Moreover, the jobs are an economic boost for communities where unemployment can reach 90 percent.

“The economic benefits of EFF crews in these communities is huge,” says Louis Silas, wildland fire program manager for the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments. In a busy year, an EFF crew member can expect to take home roughly $20,000 by the end of the season, enough to get a family through a long winter.

Despite the benefits, though, in the past decade crew numbers have fallen by about half in remote communities, says Kent Slaughter, a manager of the Alaska Fire Service. Three years ago, Upper Yukon had 10 emergency firefighting crews. Today, only four remain — two in Fort Yukon and two in Venetie. As Silas, a half-Athabascan Native who fought fires for 17 years, explains, “There’s just not enough people and not enough interest.”

While some have left for energy jobs on the North Slope, others, Silas thinks, have been discouraged by the work’s unpredictable nature. People are reluctant to fulfill the physically arduous training requirements if they’re not going to get called out on assignment, especially if steadier work is available at local schools or state fish and game agencies. Moreover, many Alaska Natives are subsistence hunters, and all too often the fire season collides with fishing season. “If it’s a choice between going out on assignment and going out and fishing for your family, it’s very tough,” says Kilgriff. “The fish don’t last forever, but the fire season doesn’t either.”

Last year’s overwhelming fires, Kilgriff says, kindled a slight uptick in interest at firefighting training sessions held across the interior this past May. “A lot of people came back with new fishing nets, new guns, and new snow machines. They got people interested in fire.”

Still, if the fires continue to get bigger and burn longer, more firefighters may not be enough, and it’s unclear just how long these remote villages will remain habitable. “It’s not very forgiving country,” says Kilgriff, “even in the summer.”

The LATEST

Backstory

A methane “hot spot” over the Four Corners region has puzzled scientists for nearly a decade: Concentrations of the greenhouse gas were far higher than could be accounted for by official inventories from known contributors — an underground coal mine, landfills, and oil and gas infrastructure. So in 2015, NASA scientists began an intensive examination of energy infrastructure, geologic methane seeps exacerbated by drilling and other potential sources (“Unlocking the mystery of the Four Corners methane hot spot,” HCN, 8/31/15).

Followup

In August, NASA released a study saying that the hot spot is largely due to natural production. An aerial survey detected 250 individual sources, including gas wells, storage tanks and pipelines, that together account for gas emissions at rates up to 11,000 pounds per hour. Of those, just 25 “super-emitters” accounted for a quarter of all methane spewing into the atmosphere. Industry representatives dispute the findings, though, saying NASA overlooked geologic seeps to focus on oil and gas.

Page Blankenbuehler

Methane and heat emitting from a gas plant in Bloomfield, New Mexico. EARTHWORKS
A conversation with Stephen Jackson

Climate science director makes case for tolerating some invasive species

BY ZACK COLMAN

The more intensively we have to manage to maintain (historical) ecosystems in a museum-piece-like context, it’s no longer a natural system.

Stephen Jackson has a radical idea for saving the Southwest’s Sonoran Desert: In places where it’s already infested with invasive species, it might be best to just leave it alone. Millions of acres of the Sonoran have been overrun by highly flammable South African buffelgrass, a fire-adapted perennial that burns readily and recovers quickly, crowding out native saguaro cactus and shrubs. Land managers can’t restore all those acres, says Jackson, and they shouldn’t even try; taking a triage approach would let them focus more effectively on high-priority areas.

While the idea of letting an invasive grass set parts of Arizona ablaze may inflame some conservation purists, Jackson’s viewpoint is shared by a growing number of ecologists who believe that, in many cases, tolerating so-called “novel ecosystems” flush with invasive species is more realistic than trying to return changing environments to a pre-industrial condition.

Accepting the presence of some invasive species will undoubtedly cause some problems in the long term, says Jackson, director of the Department of the Interior’s Southwest Climate Science Center; an arm of the U.S. Geological Survey. But he and his colleagues contend that trying to completely eradicate many invasive species is not only prohibitively expensive, it’s often not even possible.

HCN contributor Zack Colman recently caught up with Jackson. Below is an interview with Jackson, which has been condensed and edited for clarity.

High Country News Where did the concept of novel ecosystems come from?

Stephen Jackson The general perception that was widely held among conservationists was that the goal was to make things as if humans hadn’t intervened or hadn’t disturbed the system. Then came the realization that restoring to the pre-disturbance condition was often difficult to impossible — basically prohibitively expensive in a lot of ecosystems. And then when (you have) persistent invasive species, you can’t always eradicate the invaders. Environmental change also makes it hard to return to previous conditions. The other direction came from paleoecology, my own field, where since the 1960s, we have been discussing and studying ecosystems of the past that have no modern counterpart on the landscape. Some analyses of climate projections for the late 21st century, particularly under scenarios of high greenhouse-gas emissions, show combinations of seasonal temperatures and precipitation that have no counterpart in the 20th century or any time in the past.

HCN How do those climate projections reinforce the idea of novel ecosystems?

SJ Climate change is certainly taking us into new realms, into new environmental realizations. We cannot control wildfires of the magnitude that we’ve been seeing. Our species and our society do not have the capacity to control nature on that kind of scale. As we go further into a world of climate change and altered environments, we’re less and less in a position to be able to maintain historical ecosystems. They’re more and more out of sync with the prevailing environment. And then the more intensively we have to manage to maintain those ecosystems in a museum-piece-like context, it’s no longer a natural system; it’s an intensively managed system that’s aspiring to some putatively natural standard that has become an anachronism.

HCN Do you feel like you’re fighting an uphill battle? It seems to collide with the wilderness preservation mindset of a lot of the conservation community.

SJ I was and continue to be passionate about natural areas and natural processes. But I’ve also come to realize some of the limitations of that whole philosophy. The whole idea of ecological novelty forces us to confront our most deeply held assumptions and values concerning what we’re trying to accomplish with restoration and conservation.

(Critics say that) if we accept novel ecosystems and work within that framework, then we are prematurely declaring surrender. A more extreme version of that view is a slippery slope argument: By yielding any ground to ecological novelty, we open the door to all kinds of bad things happening and the manipulation of the process by people who really don’t have the best interests of biodiversity or ecosystem services or humanity in mind. I understand that concern and agree that there is a risk of that happening, but at the same time there are ways that we can manage those risks. The other perspective that’s coming in here is a reluctance to re-examine or let go of the 20th century conservation paradigm, which is to maintain things in as natural and pristine a state as possible or to restore things to as natural a state as possible.

HCN Does whether we accept novel ecosystems come down to whether we have enough money to return the land to some kind of pristine state?

SJ There are certainly extreme cases where restoring to the pre-disturbance condition is impossible — no matter how much money is spent — because the soil is gone, the toxic metals are bubbling up to the surface. In those cases, we simply have to accept that, live with it, and figure out what we’re going to do with it.

Perhaps it’s true that in particular settings with enough money and with enough commitment in resources we could restore something to a pre-disturbance state, and maintain it there. But it would require continual and sometimes intensive intervention. A large number of managers and decision-makers working in the field have found the principle of novel ecosystems helpful and even liberating, because it allows them a way out of what seems to them to be an impossible situation.

HCN In the Sonoran Desert, what is invasive buffelgrass doing to the ecosystem?

SJ Buffelgrass was brought in partly for mined-land reclamation, partly for livestock grazing. It’s perennial and it’s highly flammable. And that’s very unusual — most of the grasses of the lower Sonoran Desert are annual, and they’re not very flammable. It’s a very effective seed disperser, and it’s very successful in the kind of climate that we have here. So it’s been...
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Each one of you makes a difference for our coverage of the West.
A RURAL HEALTH

Lessons from the Central Valley

For rural California, hospital closures mean more than a gap in health care

BY ELIZABETH ZACH

AS FIRE CHIEF IN Kingsburg, a small town in California’s Central Valley, Tim Ray has done more than battle blazes in the past few years. Actual fires here are relatively few, in fact. These days, Ray, a trim 52-year-old with clipped moustache and gentle eyes, oversees a kind of volunteer medical transportation service, hustling patients from this idyllic town — settled by Swedish immigrants in the 1870s and still bedecked with “Välkommen” welcome signs — as far as 20 miles away, to a hospital in Fresno.

Kingsburg’s hospital closed in 2010, so while some residents can seek treatment in nearby Selma, just five miles away, more complicated ailments, like strokes or heart attacks, require a trip to Fresno. That’s still within the so-called “golden hour,” when saving a life is most possible, Ray told me, as we sat one morning at the local firehouse. “But we’ve also had situations where we’re transporting a patient, and I get a call from a hospital letting me know there are no beds at a hospital where we’re about to take a patient.”

Kingsburg may be quaint, but the lack of a hospital is making life difficult for many of the 11,000 residents. All that remains of the Kingsburg Medical Center, opened half a century ago, is a mental health clinic that is ill-suited to provide emergency services or other kinds of medical care. Despite the proximity of Selma or Fresno, many residents are referred to the Tulare Regional Medical Center, 36 miles away. That distance is more than an inconvenience; on occasion, it can be life-threatening.

The lack of a hospital can also erode a community’s sense of security and affect its economy. Potential job-creators are more inclined to set up shop closer to hospitals, especially in urban areas, where doctors are more likely to set up practice.

“People here still talk about” Kingsburg Medical, Ray said. “They can still remember what it was like to have the hospital here.”

The fate of Kingsburg Medical is not an isolated tale of woe. It was one of more than 70 rural hospitals that have closed nationwide since 2010, about one per month.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Inspector General, rural closures are caused by a range of factors: the failure of communities to recover from the 2008 financial collapse; hospital mergers and other market trends; states’ refusal to expand Medicaid; and reduced demand for inpatient services. The Affordable Care Act and similar programs that provide Americans with medical insurance may have created an additional, unintended strain on rural health care.

“There are over 600 rural hospitals at financial risk” nationwide, Maggie Elehwany, vice president of government affairs at the bipartisan nonprofit National Rural Healthcare Association, said. “Over 200 of these rural hospitals are extremely vulnerable to (closure) and are at high financial risk. Since 2010, the number of rural hospital closures has escalated each year. On this current trajectory, more than one-quarter of all rural hospitals (over 500) will close in less than 10 years.”

California’s Central Valley has seen three hospitals close since 2010, underscoring the national problem and serving, perhaps, as a wake-up call to other parts of the West, which has lost eight rural hospitals in the last six years. Some of the Central Valley’s eight counties now have as few as two hospitals to serve their populations.

Kingsburg Medical’s closure coincided with a steep decline in the growth of the town, which had grown rapidly from 2,310 people in 1950 to 11,382 in 2010 — a rate of between 24 and 54 percent every decade. But the estimated population for 2015 was just 11,824, a growth rate of only 3.9 percent from 2010.

The housing crisis and recession hit the Central Valley particularly hard in 2007. Unemployment climbed. The semi-rural suburban landscape was soon pockmarked by hollowed-out homes and neighborhoods.

Kingsburg Medical, which was already struggling before 2008, could not sustain itself in that environment. Kingsburg’s city manager, Alex Henderson, points to changes in the health-care industry, namely the move away from rural facilities to more regionalized hospitals, as a main factor. This led to the loss of revenue for Kingsburg Medical, and it drove doctors to larger facilities, where compensation is generally better.

In the end, Kingsburg Medical was unable to afford the equipment and infrastructure upgrades it needed to remain a viable hospital. “It’s like with everything else these days,” Ray, the fire chief, said. “The market determines everything, but somehow it seems to ignore this one need. I still have a dream that a large regional hospital will get built here, someday.”

THE LACK OF A HOSPITAL or major health center can create a domino effect: Doctors don’t move in, hospitals are short-staffed and underfunded, and potential residents and businesses are discouraged from relocating by the lack of nearby health care. All of this affects the local economy. “Hospitals are large demanders of labor,” said Cristina Miller, an economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, who has studied rural health care. “They offer local jobs, both for high- and low-skilled workers, everything from the obvious, like nursing, to janitorial to maintenance. An employee buys a house in the area, brings their family with them and demands public goods. Their kids will go to school there, they’ll buy gas and food there, money circulates. The idea is that there is spillover.”

Even if the hospitals in the Central Valley were to reopen, or a regional hospital was built to serve the area, attracting and retaining doctors would be difficult. There is more money to be earned in urban areas, and some doctors perceive small towns as offering a...
constricted social life.

Marie-Elizabeth Ramas was one of those who gave it a try. Until April, when she announced she was leaving, she was the medical director at the Mercy Community Rural Health Clinic, which focuses on uninsured, low-income families around Mount Shasta, a small town of 3,300 in Northern California.

Ramas is a soft-spoken African-American woman, who graduated from medical school in 2008 and went on to receive a National Health Service Corps scholarship for her commitment to primary care in underserved communities. She initially imagined that being a rural physician would give her more time to spend with her family. Instead, she felt stretched thin. “I was essentially on call 24/7, because of inefficiencies in the electronic record-keeping system, often spending 10

Please see Lessons, page 15
A video cure for rural health care’s challenges

A program to connect urban specialists with rural doctors saves time and money on stroke treatment

By Leah Todd

Every minute counts during a stroke. Blood-thinning drugs and surgery can prevent traumatic brain injury, but doctors must act fast: A life-saving procedure called a clot retrieval, for instance, is only effective within about eight hours of a stroke’s onset.

A drug called tPA, which dissolves stroke-inducing blood clots, must start acting within about four hours. Moreover, a wrong move can be deadly when treating a stroke patient. Few rural emergency room doctors are trained to confidently make such high-stakes calls. As a result, only a tiny fraction of rural stroke victims eligible for the life-saving blood-thinner actually get it, said Howard Yonas, a neurosurgeon at the University of New Mexico.

Instead, many rural doctors opt to fly patients by helicopter to the state’s only Level 1 trauma center in Albuquerque, a costly and sometimes unnecessary measure that consumes precious hours. Now, Yonas and other New Mexico doctors are turning to the power of remote medicine to help stroke patients avoid expensive life-flights and receive timely procedures.

The strategy is to loop Albuquerque specialists into rural emergency rooms by video and immediately share brain scans before deciding to transfer the patient. The program, called Access to Critical Cerebral Support Services, or ACCESS, started in 2014 with a $15.1 million grant from the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. In the two years since, one hospital in Roswell has gone from shipping about half its brain trauma victims to Albuquerque to transferring just 6 percent.

Another hospital in Santa Rosa has more than doubled how often it gives tPA. Nine hospitals statewide use the system, and five more will join soon. Yonas hasn’t studied individual patient outcomes yet, so there’s no hard evidence showing whether people receiving care in rural settings here survive strokes at the same rate and with similar physical outcomes as those transferred to Albuquerque.

However, studies of other telemedicine programs have shown outcomes that are nearly identical, and doctors and nurses using the program in New Mexico say their patients are doing at least as well as they were before ACCESS began.

Stroke is the fifth-leading cause of death in New Mexico, and a leading cause of adult disability. In 2014 alone, 822 New Mexicans died from a stroke — more than those who died from drug overdoses and homicides combined. ACCESS started with a simple observation. Yonas noticed something peculiar about patients who arrived on a stretcher at his Albuquerque medical center: About one in four, he estimated, didn’t actually need to be there. Their strokes and other brain injuries weren’t as bad as doctors initially believed, and their brain scans showed nothing significant. If rural doctors had better information, Yonas said, patients could be treated in their home hospitals, sparing tens of thousands of dollars for a life-flight and several hours’ drive for concerned family members. Yonas conducted a study to test his theory.

For a year, he tracked head trauma patients at seven rural New Mexico hospitals. He discovered that after hospitals began sharing brain scan images and consulting with Albuquerque doctors, they cut the number of life-flights nearly in half, treating twice as many patients locally. Yonas’ finding led to a massive three-year federal grant to launch the ACCESS program at a handful of hospitals across the state. The program bought new computers and cameras to live-stream video from rural emergency rooms, paid for doctors’ consulting time, and created a web-based system for quickly transferring brain scans between hospitals.

Local ER doctors now have the ability to consult one of eight UNM neurosurgeons, like Yonas, who in turn decide how best to handle brain trauma patients: to life-flight or not? Is the stroke patient a candidate for tPA, or is this a different type of stroke? “You can talk to the patient, you can see the patient, you can ask the patient to do certain tests,” Yonas said. “All of that can happen within about 30 minutes of the time they come (into the ER).”

National research suggests telemedicine can increase how often stroke patients who need tPA actually get the drug. A study of the University of Pittsburgh’s telestroke network, for instance, showed that the rate of stroke patients who received tPA more than doubled after starting a telemedicine program.

One early adopter was Eastern New Mexico Medical Center in Roswell, a city of 48,000 about 200 miles southeast of Albuquerque. In 2015, emergency room doctors there consulted with UNM specialists on 354 brain trauma patients — victims of everything from strokes to headaches to gunshot wounds to the head. Prior to the ACCESS program,
roughly half those patients would have been transferred to Albuquerque’s trauma center, said Rod Schumacher, the hospital’s CEO.

Last year, however, the hospital transferred just 12.7 percent of those brain trauma patients. In 2016, the hospital has transferred only 6 percent.

Adding a consultation with a neurosurgeon — even through a computer screen — creates a more sophisticated system of care, Schumacher said.

“The ER doctors will tell you, there’s great comfort in having the neurosurgical consult before we treat,” he said.

Using technology to connect patients with a doctor far away — a field broadly known as telemedicine, or telehealth — is not new, and ACCESS is just one of several such projects in the state. The nationally recognized Project ECHO, for example, has trained rural doctors in New Mexico via teleconferencing for the past decade, and has expanded across more than 10 states, as well as India and Northern Ireland.

Nationwide, more than half of all states have some sort of telestroke program, though most are less than a decade old.

While telemedicine isn’t yet the norm in rural health care, it’s a growing trend, said Dale Alverson, who runs UNM’s Center for Telehealth. One reason is the growth of cheaper technology. In the late 1990s, a telemedicine setup cost about $100,000 to install, Alverson said. Today, a comparable outfit costs less than $10,000.

Another reason is consumer demand. In the past two years, two wrongful death malpractice lawsuits against rural New Mexico hospitals claimed a patient would have lived if a doctor had used telemedicine, Alverson said. Both cases were settled out of court, setting no precedent.

But for Alverson, the suits raise an interesting question: When will telemedicine become an expectation for health-care providers, rather than an exception?

“It’s going to put pressure on rural hospitals who want to avoid expensive lawsuits to use telemedicine,” he said.

For rural doctors, however, the incentive is more than just avoiding lawsuits — it’s about providing better care in their community.

“There’s this idea of keeping the right patients in the community, if you can,” said Yonas, the UNM neurosurgeon.

“That’s good for the family, it’s good for the patients, it’s good for the hospital.”

Rural hospitals lose revenue each time they transfer a patient — money many hospitals need to remain viable, Yonas said.

In Santa Rosa, a town of 3,000 people about 100 miles from Albuquerque, Guadalupe County Hospital now treats some patients who would previously have been transferred, said Antonia Lucero, a nurse who runs the hospital’s telehealth program.

Before ACCESS, years would go by without the hospital administering tPA, she said. So far in 2016, she and her staff have already given the drug three times — each time with advice from a neurosurgeon in Albuquerque.

“We give it with more confidence now,” Lucero said.

Because ACCESS hasn’t yet been subject to comprehensive study, the best evidence about the program’s patient outcomes is anecdotal. But so far, Lucero said, not a single head trauma patient treated through telemedicine at her hospital has died.

This story is part of the “Small towns, big change” project through the Solutions Journalism Network.

University of New Mexico's Department of Neurosurgery's Drs. Laila Mohammad, left, and Huy Tran, right, consult with Dr. Branko Huising-Garate, center, in a test of the video feed technology that helps diagnose and treat stroke and brain injury patients in rural areas.

**UNM Health Sciences Center**

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Elizabeth Zach is a staff writer at the Rural Community Assistance Corporation. This article was produced as a project for the USC Center for Health Journalism’s California Health Journalism Fellowship.

www.hcn.org High Country News 15
The widening gaps

Across the region, changing demographics put more pressure on health care systems

LAST YEAR, PEGGY CLEMENTS slipped on the wood floor of her home and broke her leg. Alone at the time, she waited in agony until her daughter came home and drove her to the hospital, nearly an hour away through rural Delta County in western Colorado. Clements, who turned 102 last March, was comparatively lucky: Had she suffered a heart attack or a stroke, the delay could have been fatal. When the local medical clinic closes down at the end of August in Paonia, where Clements lives and where High Country News is based, that kind of risk will be even higher.

For Clements and a growing population of the most vulnerable — the elderly, disabled and uninsured — access to health care is becoming an increasingly urgent issue. The West’s rural areas, as data from the American Medical Association and U.S. Census Bureau show, are simultaneously experiencing a higher demand for services and a decrease in the number of doctors and others qualified to provide those services.

Delta County exemplifies the problem. Since 2010, the number of residents 65 years and older here has jumped 19 percent, yet the patient-to-doctor ratio is more than 1,300 to one.

In the most extreme examples, some Western counties have seen their elderly populations increase by nearly 60 percent. According to census projections, by 2030, more than 31 million Americans will be older than 75, the largest such population in the country’s history. Nearly 17 million of them will live in the West, comprising 22 percent of the region’s projected population.

The number of doctors, meanwhile, is not keeping pace, data from the American Medical Association and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services show. Torrance County, New Mexico, for example, has a patient-to-doctor ratio of more than 15,000 to one. That’s more than four times the threshold for consideration as a “health professional shortage area.”

People who live far from health care are most vulnerable during emergencies, such as heart attacks, severe lacerations, strokes or asthma attacks. Without a nearby clinic, the delays in response become a serious problem. In Paonia, the ambulance services are run by volunteers, and the average response time is 15 minutes. Come September, the nearest clinic will be another 15 minutes away, in a neighboring town, with the nearest hospital about 30 miles from that. “That is a very long time to wait if you’re badly hurt,” says Jean Ceriani, a member of the Delta County Memorial Hospital board. “Someone could die.”

As Clements gets older, her daughter, Karen Budinger, worries about her safety. “Right now, my mom has me to drive her, but what if something happened to me?” Budinger, who is 77, asks. In the moment of quiet that follows, Clements catches her daughter’s gaze. “I don’t know what I would do,” she says. PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

Rural New Mexico hospitals pool resources to survive

GUADALUPE COUNTY HOSPITAL in Santa Rosa is home to the only emergency room between Albuquerque and Tucumcari — a 173-mile stretch of Interstate 40 that spans the lonely eastern half of New Mexico. The small city is home to fewer than 3,000 people, making it the largest town in a county with fewer than 5,000 residents. More than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line.

For Guadalupe County’s isolated and scattered populace, the hospital plays a critical role.

“If this hospital closes, my kids have nowhere to go,” says Christina Campos, the hospital’s CEO. “My neighbors have nowhere to go. My employees have nowhere to go.” In New Mexico, a remote hospital struggling to serve a poor community is a common scenario. According to census data, one-third of the state’s population lived in “Health Professional Shortage Areas” in 2010 (see map above). Thirty-one of New Mexico’s 33 counties faced shortages.

Like most rural hospitals in the state, Guadalupe County has had to fight to get by. Many of its patients rely on government health insurance, which often doesn’t cover the hospital’s costs, let alone provide a profit. That situation is only expected to get worse as the state faces a $417 million Medicaid shortfall.

At the same time, the needs are overwhelming: New Mexico often finds itself near the bottom of nationwide lists related to health and well-being. America’s Health Rankings, for instance, placed it 37th in 2015, partly due to high rates of diabetes, drug deaths and children living in poverty.

To better cope with those challenges, Guadalupe County Hospital is teaming up with other small hospitals to share information, hire experts and offer advice on how to navigate an increasingly uncertain industry. “We’re all facing the same thing,” Campos says.

In 2014, Santa Rosa and five other hospitals founded the New Mexico Rural Hospital Network, an initiative intended to improve cooperation — and, with it, fiscal health — among small hospitals scattered across the state. The network now contains 10 members, including Holy Cross Hospital in Taos.

“All of our hospitals are the only hospital in their town, sometimes even in their whole county or beyond,” Stephen Stoddard, the network’s executive director, says.

The group’s creation was aided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which regularly funds rural hospital networks to improve efficiency, expand access and improve quality of care. In its most recent round of funding two years ago, the agency awarded a total of $11.6 million to 39 networks nationwide, from Alaska to Maine. The New Mexico network received a $300,000 grant.

“Generally, the purpose of these hospi-
Peggy Clements, 102, is led out of her house by senior community van driver Al Early. Each Tuesday and Thursday, Clements does activities with other seniors through the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, which also has a nurse check on her every morning. Both help address her loneliness, which she says is the hardest part about getting older. BROOK WARREN

The West’s doctor deserts

Stillwater County, MT
9,318 patients per physician

Torrance County, NM
15,717 patients per physician

Owyhee County, ID
11,472 patients per physician

The West’s aging population

San Juan County, CO
80% more people over 65 than in 2010

Percent change, 2010-2015, in population 65 and older

Sources: Left, American Medical, The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. Above, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2015

The West’s vulnerable populations


to survive  BY J.R. LOGAN/TAOS NEWS

tal networks is to focus on helping them thrive,” Stoddard says. “But in the case of New Mexico, it’s to survive.”

In some cases, that means creating economies of scale: New Mexico’s member hospitals have entered into group purchasing agreements, for example, lowering prices on bulk purchases for necessities like bandages and bedpans. Guadalupe County Hospital has already cut its annual supply costs by nearly one-third, from $100,000 to $70,000.

Before the network’s creation, says Campos, the CEO at Guadalupe County, “If you were a medical records office manager, you were the only one you knew. Now you have nine others that you can call on.” That might sound simple. And obvious. But Stoddard explains that the staff of a small rural hospital is more likely to suffer from professional isolation that can hurt performance and stifle innovation. And without a formal network, conversations that inspire learning and creativity — and, in turn, lead to cost savings — usually don’t happen.

That was true for Leslie Sanchez, who oversees medical records at Guadalupe County Hospital and has been part of the network’s committee meetings for about a year. “It was just nice to be able to hear their experiences and their problems and realize, ‘Wow, I’m not the only one going crazy,'” Sanchez says.

Sanchez learned, for example, that another records clerk in Lovington had experienced a problem she was dealing with: doctors who failed to do paperwork. That clerk had developed a series of emails to prompt doctors to complete it. It was a simple approach, but it was more structured, Sanchez says. And it works much better than her strategy of gentle nagging.

The network has also hired its own specialist to analyze contracts with insurance companies to ensure that terms are fair and comparable to other hospitals — expertise that would be hard for any one of these hospitals to afford on its own.

Furthermore, the network is working with the University of New Mexico to draw more medical students to do rotations in rural hospitals. Studies have found that attracting medical students to small hospitals makes it easier to hire them later, when they finish school. So the network gives these small facilities more to offer them, Stoddard says.

For all the group’s accomplishments, its success remains tenuous. It’s not clear whether cooperation and bulk purchasing will be enough to keep small hospitals viable. But network members say it can’t hurt. If the network can prove its worth to its members, they might be willing to shell out more money or find funding elsewhere — and face these challenges as a group, rather than going it alone.

“Generally, the purpose of these hospital networks is to focus on helping (hospitals) thrive. But in the case of New Mexico, it’s to survive.”

— Stephen Stoddard, executive director, New Mexico Rural Hospital Network

This story is part of the “Small towns, big change” project through the Solutions Journalism Network.
A fix for the ‘catch-all’ emergency room?

_In Colorado, a new movement aims to provide an alternative for people experiencing mental health crises_  
**BY LEAH TODD**

**STEVEN LEDWON WOKE** with his arms strapped to a hospital bed.

Police had picked up Ledwon, 55, in late April from a local shelter in Alamosa, Colorado, where he was hallucinating and speaking garbled Spanish. Likely triggered by a change in medication, Ledwon’s psychotic episode was compounded by crippling anxiety. Police dropped him off in the emergency room—a common destination for mental health patients, but one that may cause as much harm as good.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mental disorders like Ledwon’s caused 5.3 million visits to emergency departments nationwide in 2011, 4 percent of all trips. All too often, however, ERs are ill-equipped to handle patients whose illnesses are mental or emotional rather than physical. Not only are ER visits expensive—one industry analysis pegged the median cost at $1,200—they take time and beds from patients who require physical care. The chaotic ER environment, too, is hardly conducive to mental health. During every hospital visit, Ledwon said, the needles, harsh lights and restraining straps made him feel even more anxious than when he walked in.

Despite the many drawbacks to ER visits, law enforcement often has nowhere else to house people who are clearly experiencing mental health crises but are not a danger to themselves or others. The emergency room, said Alamosa County Sheriff Robert Jackson, is “our catch-all.” Police here have few other options. The county jail is overcrowded, and just two officers in Alamosa have been trained in crisis intervention, which teaches officers to de-escalate situations involving people in mental health crisis. Alamosa, a town of 10,000 people that serves as a hub for those seeking social services throughout Colorado’s isolated San Luis Valley, has just nine beds in its ER.

Reducing unnecessary and counterproductive ER visits is one mission of Mi Esperanza, a small wellness center run by a behavioral health group in Alamosa. The goal is to give people in crisis everything they need, including breathing exercises to calm anxiety, talk therapy to handle tough emotions and case managers to help with life logistics.

Just as important is what you won’t find at Mi Esperanza: No needles, no harsh lights, no armed police officers.

May, Mi Esperanza served 28 visitors—20 more than it hosted in May 2015. Some stay for 30 minutes; others linger for hours. So far this year, the staff has referred three patients to the ER, deciding they needed regular medical care.

Mi Esperanza and other so-called “crisis living rooms” are part of an emerging movement to decrease the inappropriate use of ERs. In 2015, Colorado Springs’ mobile crisis response team brought 564 people experiencing mental health or substance abuse-related problems to that city’s crisis living room. In the past two years, similar facilities have opened in Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, Pueblo and Grand Junction.

Some mental health crises could be better addressed by providing support and resources, exactly as crisis living rooms seek to do, said Barbara Harris, a DePaul University nursing professor who has studied living-room programs.

In a recent study of one facility near Chicago, Harris spoke with a patient who equated hospitals’ heavy-handed treatment of mental health conditions to using a nuclear weapon to kill a small animal. Sometimes people don’t need emergency medical care; they just need to talk to a counselor.

Some ERs are creating special sections for people with mental health conditions, away from sights and sounds that might further upset them, Harris said. But living-room advocates want to keep those people out of the ER in the first place.

Although crisis living rooms are catching on, they may not always be the right tool for the job. Some mental health crises, such as suicide attempts, require medical treatment, Harris said. And it’s hard to put a finger on how well facilities like Mi Esperanza are working. The number of people turning to Alamosa’s ER for mental health complaints has actually increased since Mi Esperanza opened, according to data from the San Luis Valley Regional Medical Center. In 2014, the ER handled 242 visits. In 2015, that number grew to 276.

Even Harris, the DePaul researcher, said data comparing the outcomes of living-room clients to those who received emergency medical care are lacking nationally. Instead, she and others point...
Steven Ledwon relaxes in Mi Esperanza’s “comfort room” while listening to his favorite band, Pearl Jam. Ledwon, a recovering alcoholic who used to frequent the local emergency room, comes to what he calls the “Star Room” at the wellness center weekly, and says, “I wish I had this room at home. I would use it all the time.”

One metric suggests Mi Esperanza may be helping, said Julie Ramstetter, who manages the Medical Center’s trauma program. Fewer chronic users — people visiting the ER two to three times per week — show up in Alamosa’s ER today than six months ago.

Yet Mi Esperanza’s hours may prevent it from reaching those who need its services most. Many people with mental health disorders end up in the ER in evenings or on weekends, Ramstetter said. Mi Esperanza is only open weekdays, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. When a man showed up to the ER with no physical injuries at 4:30 p.m. on a weekday earlier this year, Ramstetter thought he’d be a good fit for Mi Esperanza. You can wait here for two hours until a doctor can see you, she recalled telling him, or you can try this other facility. The man left. A few hours later, he was back in the ER.

Steven Ledwon first visited the Living Room after the incident that landed him in the hospital earlier this year. A mental health worker brought him there after doctors decided he was stable enough on his medications and released him.

On a recent morning, Ledwon walked into a small, dark room, sparsely outfitted with one recliner and chair. Colored lights twinkled on the ceiling. Ledwon calls this the “Star Room,” where staff puts on calming music. For Ledwon, that means Pearl Jam or Pink Floyd.

“This is the most magical room for me,” said Ledwon, a former UPS worker with a weathered face and a gravelly voice. “It works miracles in here. You can go in there a train wreck, and five minutes later you’re breathing normal, thinking clear, and able to go home instead of a hospital.”

At first, Ledwon, a recovering alcoholic, visited Mi Esperanza every day — sometimes twice. He now lives in an apartment run by the San Luis Valley Behavioral Health Group, which also operates Mi Esperanza using operational funds and a state grant, and stops by about once a week. The staff bought him a cellphone and helps him see a doctor regularly. Ledwon hasn’t been back to the ER since.

Recently, Ledwon became agitated when he thought his prescription medications had not been filled properly. He knew the signs: tight chest, shallow breath, talking to himself. He headed straight for Mi Esperanza.

“People were shying away from me on the street, and I thought, ‘I better go in here before I get thrown in jail,’” Ledwon said.

He sat on a couch with Esquibel, who played a Pearl Jam song. Ledwon remembered a technique he learned at another recovery center long ago: When you’re thinking of something bad, try to focus on something good, like fishing. He closed his eyes.

Ten minutes later, Ledwon felt good enough to walk home.
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www.hcn.org High Country News 21
Our winning writer, and so long to a good friend

As summer fades, we’re wrapping up our annual photo contest, in which we solicited images of the West’s national parks. While it’s too late to submit a picture, you can still vote for your favorite until Sept. 15 at hcn.org/photos16.

Meanwhile, we’ve been busy catching up with visitors. Dave Morris, who works at the Wild Rockies Field Institute in Missoula, Montana, stopped by. He has been a subscriber for many years and always wanted to see HCN headquarters, where we hatch some of our best ideas (and squash some of the worst). As a teacher in Gothic, Colorado, Dave used HCN articles in some of his classes.

Paula Peterson came by on the way to a concert by Tim O’Brien at Pickin’ in the Park, a weekly concert series that runs every August. Paula, the recreation manager for Eagle-Holy Cross Ranger District in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, has worked for the Forest Service for 26 years and is a HCN fan.

We’ve also had reason to celebrate: Our Paonia-based correspondent, Sarah Tory, was awarded a reporting fellowship and residency from the Carey Institute for Global Good Nonfiction Program, which supports writers working on environmental, human rights and justice topics. Sarah will focus on a California town that has come to rely on private prisons to support its once-agricultural economy. Congratulations, Sarah.

We were saddened by news of the death of longtime HCN subscriber, lawyer and activist Gene Lorig, who spent his last years in Paonia. Gene and his wife of 58 years, Margo, spearheaded a successful grassroots effort in the 1980s and 1990s to prevent Adam’s Rib, a proposed major ski resort, from being built in the narrow valley of East Brush Creek, 15 miles south of Paonia.

Gene’s life spanned the old West and the new. He was born in 1927 in Telluride, where his parents owned a store that sold clothes to miners’ families. At 16, Gene began working in the mill at Telluride’s mine. He graduated from Western State College and Denver’s Westminster Law School, then served a term as district attorney before settling in for a career as a general practice lawyer.

An avid hiker, camper and Nordic skier, Gene climbed numerous 14,000-foot peaks, and, according to his daughter, Dorothy, rarely encountered a jeep road he couldn’t tackle with the family’s 1965 Toyota Land Cruiser.

Some corrections to the Aug. 22 issue:

In “A Backup in the National Parks Jobs Pipeline,” a sidebar indicated that Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Monument is in Illinois. It’s located near Concord, California. Contributing Editor Glenn Nelson was misidentified as a member of Green 2.0. He is not. In the review of Harnessing the Wind, the photo collection should have been credited to the Center for Art + Environment Archive Collections, Nevada Museum of Art. We also incorrectly described the goal of Bryan Burke, a recent visitor to our office, who is “running” the entire Colorado River system. Bryan is river-running, as in on a boat, not on foot.

—Paige Blankenbuehler, for the staff
able to establish itself pretty broadly in many parts of the Sonoran Desert, including in the mountains around Tucson. It’s in Saguaro National Park, it’s in the Coronado National Forest, it’s in some of the (Bureau of Land Management) lands.

One of the threats with buffelgrass is that it is potentially an ecosystem transformer species. The buffelgrass survives fire, most everything else doesn’t survive, and then the buffelgrass comes back even more aggressively because the competition is gone.

**HCN** Are we just going to have to cede the Sonoran Desert to buffelgrass?

**SJ** The novel ecosystem that buffelgrass has created in some parts of the Sonoran Desert is an undesirable ecosystem from my point of view. I don’t really see any value in it. Nothing that I or most other people value about the natural world is there in a buffelgrass-dominated ecosystem compared to the beautiful and diverse Sonoran Desert ecosystem. This is a novel ecosystem that in my view should not be embraced.

That said, buffelgrass can be eradicated locally, but it’s a very intensive process. You can dig it up, and as long as you get the underground material, it’s gone. There are campaigns in various places of just going out there and digging it out. That’s actually been very effective within Tucson and some of the urbanized areas. But the labor is immense, and just hauling the bags of buffelgrass out is a huge logistical problem, especially in the backcountry. It can also be controlled with herbicides, but they’re effective only in the brief period of buffelgrass green-up. You have to get your ground crews mobilized and helicopters in the air on very short notice, and cover a lot of territory in a narrow time window. It may be impossible to completely eradicate it. But what we can do instead is maintain vigilance and manage it.

**HCN** For any novel ecosystem, is there a sort of Ten Commandments for proper management?

**SJ** Ecological management and ecological restoration is highly situationally dependent. All management decisions in the real world require a series of trade-offs, and all of them entail direct costs, and all of them entail opportunity costs.

For some parts of the Sonoran Desert, such as Saguaro National Park, that seems to be a fairly easy and straightforward decision: We like Saguaro because it’s this extensive area of beautiful native vegetation that imparts aesthetic values, it imparts ethical values, it imparts cultural values, it imparts economic values through tourism and hiking. To prevent the park from converting over to a mono-specific buffelgrass meadow, resource managers and others have made the decision that it is worth the investment to control buffelgrass. In other cases, the decision calculus may come out to be different if the invasive species is less likely to have such a transformational effect on the ecosystem. It would be a wonderful world if we had enough resources to go around and do everything we want, but as optimistic as I was in the 1970s after Earth Day, I haven’t lived long enough to see that day yet. And I’m not sure it’s going to come any time soon. In the meantime, we have to use the resources we have as wisely as we can, not letting the perfect interfere with the good.
David battling Goliath is a cliché. But how else to describe the struggle between a rural electric co-op and its powerful supplier of electricity? “David,” in this case, is the Delta-Montrose Electric Association, a medium-sized co-op in west-central Colorado. It serves 71,000 customers across two counties and 3,400 square miles with roughly 100 employees.

“Goliath” is Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, which sells electricity to 43 co-ops across Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming and Nebraska. It has 1,500 employees, strip mines, power plants and 1 million customers over its four states and 200,000 square miles.

Like the biblical David, Delta-Montrose has sunk a stone deep into Tri-State’s forehead. The missile was provided by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which ordered Delta-Montrose to buy any reasonably priced renewable energy on offer. The order cut the heart out of power-purchase contracts that Tri-State has with Delta-Montrose and its 42 other co-ops. Those contracts require the co-ops to buy at least 95 percent of their power from Tri-State until mid-century.

Standing on the bedrock of those contracts, Tri-State has borrowed $3.4 billion to build power plants and transmission lines. The commission’s order throws a bombshell into that mountain of debt and the power plants it finances. If, over time, enough co-ops substitute local renewable power for Tri-State’s power, Tri-State could go bankrupt.

You would not guess Tri-State’s peril from its sunny 2015 annual report. Even the fine print in its audit statement doesn’t mention the commission’s decision. But in Docket EL16-39, on the website of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Tri-State’s lawyers warn that the agency’s 2015 decision could jeopardize “Tri-State’s well-being and existence.”

The lawyers are not exaggerating. The electric co-ops describe themselves, accurately, as a close-knit family. Why, then, did Delta-Montrose, a typical co-op in a rural area, create this crisis? The story starts in 2004, when Tri-State asked its co-ops to extend their contracts from 2040 to 2050. Tri-State needed the extension to build a new multibillion-dollar coal plant in western Kansas. Lenders would not finance a plant that could run out of customers before the plant’s debt was paid off.

The other 42 co-ops extended their contracts. But the board of Delta-Montrose refused. It wanted to avoid spending 40 years paying for a plant it believed would be obsolete long before 2050.
more power at home. It hoped that other co-ops would follow its lead, and that as Tri-State’s aging plants were shut, the power generated by local co-ops would provide a smooth transition. But Tri-State and the other co-ops never took Delta-Montrose’s approach seriously. It ran counter to the traditional business model.

Federally directed and financed electrification, working through small locally controlled co-ops, rescued rural America from literal darkness and deep poverty in the 1930s and 1940s. It is a glorious history. But with time, the co-ops’ focus on local economies was replaced by loyalty to the ever more centralized and large-scale system that kept those lights on. Cheap, reliable electricity, generated in huge power plants — with the host communities getting all the jobs and property taxes — ultimately became the system’s business model.

But solar and especially wind are now competitive with central-station power. The Delta-Montrose co-op’s area is rich in sunlight, falling water and large flows of methane out of its underground coal mines. Thanks to a visionary former general manager named Dan McClendon, the co-op board came to see rural electrification as a path to a rejuvenated local economy. It successfully resisted extend-

The South Canal Hydroelectric Project is one of Delta-Montrose Electric Association’s local renewable energy projects, and is the largest local member hydroelectric project within the Tri-State membership. DMEA

ing its contract with Tri-State.

But even without an extension, the contract was good through 2040, and it still blocked Delta-Montrose from expanding its area’s jobs and tax base. Then came freedom: The commission’s 2015 order allowing Delta-Montrose to use local renewable power.

Delta-Montrose also hopes that cheap local renewables will fend off the same threat the commission’s order poses to Tri-State. Just as Tri-State fears losing its 43 co-ops, Delta-Montrose fears losing its own customers to rooftop solar and cheaper batteries.

Meanwhile, Tri-State, rather than adapting to a new reality, is appealing the commission’s decision for the second time. Because the decision applies to all of the nation’s 840 co-ops and 65 power suppliers, this dispute — begun by a small co-op — could engage the entire system and end up before Congress.

Ed Marston is the former publisher of High Country News and served on the Delta-Montrose Electric Association board of directors for 18 years.

Writers on the Range is a syndicated service of High Country News, providing three opinion columns each week to more than 200 media outlets around the West. For more information, contact Betsy Marston, betsym@hcn.org. 970-527-4898.
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Slaughter of the Innocents

Two years ago, some neighbors asked me to participate in the extermination of a prairie dog colony that covered parts of our adjoining four fields. They assured me the prairie dogs wouldn’t suffer when their burrows were gassed and backfilled. One of them compared the process to me killing the grasshoppers in my garden, but added, “If you don’t do it, it’s no big deal.”

I’m a practicing Buddhist: I find killing abhorrent even when necessary. I couldn’t see how exterminating a colony of hundreds of sentient beings was necessary.

Yet I understood my neighbors’ desire to eliminate these rodents. Their burrows can break the legs of livestock and damage tractors, and their fleas carry bubonic plague. When a colony’s movements are limited by geography, it can denude a field quickly. Our parcels were once part of a single ranch, and they had few if any prairie dogs when we bought them eight years earlier. Now, there were hundreds of burrows, and possibly thousands of prairie dogs.

Prairie dogs are an ecologically important species, however. In their native grasslands, they create unique habitat used by creatures ranging from burrowing owls to badgers, many of which die when a burrow network is gassed. They’re prey for predators from hawks to weasels.

After a month of deliberation, I heard a radio interview with author Terry Tempest Williams, in which she recounted Navajo elders’ objections to government-sponsored prairie dog extermination in the 1950s: “If you kill all the prairie dogs, there will be no one to cry for the rain.” Officials ignored the warning; hardship, erosion and flash-flooding ensued. I told the neighbors no.

My refusal, it turned out, was a big deal. One neighbor quit speaking to me altogether. This year, a new neighbor offered to pay the entire cost of gassing my field, now the prairie dog epicenter of the neighborhood. She cited an injured gelding and said, “I simply can’t afford to have them.”

Under pressure this spring, I revisited the question and sought advice from various people, starting with an email to Terry Tempest Williams. “Please do not kill the prairie dogs on your land,” she replied. She suggested that I instead educate my human neighbors about the importance of this keystone species.

I asked environmental philosopher Donald Maier, who responded with more questions than answers — something, he pointed out, one might expect when asking a philosopher a question. Were people always justified in clearing away the things — including living things — that stood in the way of their human projects? he asked? No! I thought. But then again, are they never?

Ranchers I’ve spoken with have tried various methods from flooding to shooting to truck exhaust. A retired farmer in my yoga class told me he used cyanide pellets; when the holes are stuffed with newspaper and backfilled, the pellets react with moisture underground and turn to gas, killing the animals within two minutes. Quick and painless, he said. Then he looked at his watch and added, “But two minutes holding a yoga pose…” Sometimes that can seem like an hour.

Finally, my friend Dawn, an environmental consultant, pointed out that the field had never been part of the prairie dogs’ natural range: Before it was cleared for agriculture, it was a juniper forest. I would be removing the animals from an artificially created environment, not a habitat they had occupied for millennia.

Prairie dogs can’t live on irrigated land. One year, we got only three weeks of irrigation water, and that is likely when they became established on the north end of my field and contiguous fields. After that, the tenant chose not to water that end, providing ideal conditions for the colony to expand.

Dawn’s second argument concerned proper stewardship. If everyone involved keeps their land thoroughly irrigated when we have sufficient water, she said, we should never face this dilemma again.

Her final point brought it home. “Remember,” she said, “when someone planted your whole yard with invasive grass seed, and you can’t get rid of it 20 years later? You’re still really unhappy about that.” My heart sank. I had allowed an unwanted species to spread over my neighbors’ land, causing them to feel a constant, impotent anger that I know too well.

I felt a sudden shame for sticking to my emotional guns for two years, without determining and facing the specific ecological truth of this particular patch of land. The next day, I confirmed that the pest control company uses cyanide; they affirmed that it’s quick and painless. I told them to go ahead. Now, I need a tenant who will water the whole field, or I need to irrigate it myself. Or I need to sell the land. Above all, I need to never do this again.

Rita Clagett lives and writes in western Colorado.
HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

MONTANA
Are state fairs going to the dogs? No; at least in Montana, they’re going to the rabbits. During Billings’ annual MontanaFair, 22 kids from Yellowstone County participated in its first-ever rabbit-hopping exposition. Their animals, each harnessed and on a leash, competed on a “bunny-agility” course featuring five jumps. The winner, named Squeakers, completed the race in what his handler, 9-year-old Dawson Harms, described as the “relatively slow time” of 32 seconds, explaining that “sometimes he finishes in five seconds.” The kids were not allowed to assist their rabbits by lifting them by the harness or discreetly hosting them over the barriers, though they could tickle their tails to encourage a leap. Many tried to do just that because “bunny after bunny balked at the first jump,” reports the Billings Gazette. As a 4-H leader explained, rabbits are more like cats: “They have their own way of doing things.” The 271 hoppers outnumbered the other types of junior livestock, but there were plenty of traditional animals competing, including 89 steers and 78 lamb or goats, plus 42 dogs entered in obedience trials, not to mention chickens, turkeys, llamas, alpacas and sundry other creatures, for a grand total of 2,720. Rabbit-hopping contests began in Sweden during the 1970s and have spread along the U.S. East Coast. In 2013, the American Rabbit Hopping Association was formed to help the new sport make even bigger leaps.

COLORADO
When properly latched, well-engineered bear-proof dumpsters defy animals able to wrestle most other containers to the ground. Unfortunately, they’re not proof against human forgetfulness. A bear break-in problem has emerged in Mount Crested Butte, Colorado, because residents keep forgetting to lock the top after they throw in their garbage. It takes just a New York minute for the sweet smell of rotting food to attract bear families, and the steel boxes are no match for the clever cubs. They crawl up, fall in, and then root around for the free food inside. Recently, the town police were called after an agitated mama bear and cub were seen outside a dumpster, yet somehow failed to notice there were three cubs trapped inside. As the Crested Butte News put it, “The next person tossing their trash certainly did (notice)!” Once the bear cubs were freed, all wandered off with mom.

NEVADA
This summer, Brittany Bronson, a college English teacher, took a job delivering cocktails at a Las Vegas hotel-casino. She was pleasantly surprised to learn that her job came with union membership, providing benefits and health care that, as she told The New York Times, “hotel workers in other states can only dream of.” Women make up the majority of the 57,000 members of Culinary Union Local 226, she discovered, and “at the top of our cocktailing matriarchy was a woman who had joined the union in 1973.” And though Nevada defines sex appeal as a legal requirement for some jobs, the state also boasts one of the smallest gender pay gaps in the country. That narrow pay gap correlates with higher numbers of women in state politics: Nevada is currently ranked sixth in the country, with women making up a third of elected state officials. The worst state for pay equity is Wyoming, which also has the smallest number of women holding political office. The next time you’re in Las Vegas, said Bronson, “ask your cocktail server whether unionization makes an enormous difference in women’s lives.”

WYOMING
Do not, repeat, do not splash while soaking in Kelly Warm Spring in Grand Teton National Park: “A parasitic amoeba that causes deadly brain infections” has turned up there, and “it travels through your nose,” reports the Jackson Hole News & Guide. The parasite was also found in two off-limits springs along the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway between Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks. The Park Service hasn’t closed Kelly Spring, but it suggests another reason for staying away: “The warm spring also had elevated levels of E. coli bacteria.”

MONTANA
Print journalism is far from dead, at least on the local level. In Kalispell, Montana, a free weekly newspaper launched in 2007 now averages 64 pages per edition with a press run of 25,000. It certainly helped that the Flathead Beacon was started by journalists with deep pockets: Maury Povich, a syndicated talk show host, and his wife, TV reporter Connie Chung. They fund five to a half full-time positions, reports the Columbia Journalism Review, and have a cool website, flatheadbeacon.com, that lets you turn virtual pages.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.

“...There is power in cute. But the real issue is about all animals having a right to exist. Why would we casually throw any species away...”

Tanya Henderson, in her essay, “Consider the vole, endangered and adorable,” from Writers on the Range, hcn.org/wotr