

Malheur County Community Mental Health, Local Alcohol and Drug, and Developmental Disabilities Advisory Committee Meeting Notes

February 25, 2026

Meeting Details

Date: February 25, 2026

Time: 8:34 PM

Duration: Approximately 25 minutes

Chair: Ted Martinez, Juvenile Department Director

Attendance

Chair: Ted Martinez

Committee Members Present:

Name	Title / Organization	Attendance
Ted Martinez (Chair)	Juvenile Department Director	Present (In Person)
Ron Van Ausdal	Lifeways Clinical Operations Officer	Present (In Person)
Steve Jensen	Lifeways CEO	Present (In Person)
Suzanne Steele	Director of Substance Use Services	Present (In Person)
Chris Phillips	DHS	Present (In Person)
Barbara Brody	Oregon State University Extension	Present (In Person)
Rebecca Stricker	Director, Malheur County Health Department	Present (Online)
Jason Cooper	Police Chief, Ontario PD	Present (Online)
Anna LaRosa	Chief Nurse, Hospital	Present (Online)
Travis Johnson	Malheur County Sheriff	Present (Online)
Brad Andrews	CDDP Director	Present (In Person)
Rachel Weideman	Lifeways	Present (In Person)

Quorum

A quorum of 8 members is required. Ron Van Ausdal noted that 7 members were physically or virtually present at the start of the meeting, one shy of a quorum. However, it was noted that member Jen Suzuki had submitted a proxy vote in advance, which brought the count to 8 and established a quorum.

Agenda Items

1. Introductions

All attendees in person and online introduced themselves at the start of the meeting.

2. Approval of Minutes (October & January)

- Motion to approve the minutes from the October and January meetings was made by Chris Phillips.
- The motion was seconded by Sheriff Travis Johnson.
- No comments or questions were raised.
- The minutes were approved by unanimous vote.

3. Public Comment

No public comments were offered. Barbara Brody confirmed that community partner updates would be held for a later agenda item.

4. Malheur County Behavioral Health Updates

Steve Jensen (Lifeways CEO) presented an update on Malheur County Behavioral Health, covering recent developments related to GOBHI, Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization, and their out-of-network provider policy changes.

Background on the GOBHI Letter (November 12):

- GOBHI (Coordinated Care Organization overseeing Medicaid enrollees) issued a letter in November stating that beginning in January, no new authorizations would be issued for out-of-network providers.
- This does NOT mean existing patients lose services — those currently in treatment with out-of-network providers may continue until their treatment is completed.
- New individuals seeking services must use in-network providers. In Malheur County, in-network options include Lifeways, TFP (contracted through Lifeways), and Valley Family Health.
- Altruistic and Insight are not currently considered in-network providers.
- GOBHI has also established a network navigator service, allowing individuals to seek treatment across all 12 counties within the EOCCO (Eastern Oregon CCO) if they choose not to use local in-network providers.

Rationale for GOBHI's Policy Change:

- GOBHI has operated under a strict in-network/out-of-network policy since 1994. During COVID, they loosened restrictions to increase capacity; this was not reversed after the pandemic ended.

- GOBHI operates on a capitated (block grant) funding model. Allowing fee-for-service out-of-network providers in addition to block grant services caused GOBHI to lose cost control.
- This is the second consecutive year GOBHI has operated in the negative. They must reduce spending or risk their ability to continue operations.
- Care Oregon took similar action (eliminating ~200 out-of-network providers) earlier in the year. This trend is occurring statewide as CCOs face reduced revenues.
- Additional revenue reductions are anticipated due to potential federal Medicaid cuts ("the big beautiful bill" / HR 1).

Lifeways Capacity Metrics:

- Lifeways currently has no wait list.
- In January, Lifeways met the required 7-day access metric at 96% for mental health and 100% for substance use services.
- Lifeways reports these metrics to GOBHI monthly. If a wait list develops, GOBHI is required to authorize out-of-network providers to absorb additional demand.
- Lifeways has been operating in the community for nearly 30 years (incorporated 1997).

5. Discussion — Community Communication & Messaging

- Barbara Brody raised concerns about community confusion and the political pressure placed on advisory committee members, particularly OSU Extension, which is expected to remain a neutral party.
- Barbara requested that a written statement or one-page summary be made available to committee members to share with community stakeholders — to reduce reliance on secondhand accounts.
- Travis Johnson noted that Steve Jensen had already presented to the County Court but the information was not received favorably, suggesting a statement directly from GOBHI would be more credible and effective.
- Ron Van Ausdal stated that GOBHI has already provided responses to the Argus Observer and to the offices of Senators Wyden and Merkley, but that a more formal public-facing response had not been issued as expected.
- Ron Van Ausdal offered to forward talking points (approximately 19 key points) clarifying the situation and addressing common misconceptions, as well as GOBHI's responses to the Senate offices.
- Barbara Brody added a request in the chat for a one-page GOBHI summary sheet.
- General agreement that the statement/clarification should come from GOBHI, not from Lifeways or the county, to carry the appropriate weight.

Action Items

Action Item	Responsible Party	Due / Notes
Forward key talking points (approx. 19 points) on the GOBHI situation and community misconceptions to committee members	Ron Van Ausdal / Steve Jensen	As soon as possible

Forward GOBHI's written responses to Senators Wyden and Merkley's offices to committee members	Ron Van Ausdal	As soon as possible
Advocate with GOBHI to issue an official one-page public statement / summary sheet addressing community concerns	Ron Van Ausdal / Steve Jensen	Ongoing
Continue monthly reporting of Lifeways capacity metrics (wait list status and 7-day access rates) to the committee	Lifeways / Ron Van Ausdal	Monthly — ongoing

Next Meeting

The next meeting date was not specified in this session. The committee will continue to monitor Lifeways capacity metrics and GOBHI's public communications regarding in-network provider policy.
