

GUEST OPINION

Managing Tri-Cities recovery center

BY MICHELE GERBER



In the last few weeks, the Tri-Cities received the fabulous, long-awaited news that a comprehensive Behavioral Health Recovery Center to treat addiction and mental illness will be built here!

We need this center badly because addiction, drug overdose rates and mental health issues are at stratospheric levels, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and long-standing causes. Statistics can document this, but, as Franklin County Sheriff Jim Raymond said recently at a public meeting, we don't need statistics to prove we have drug and mental health issues here – we can see it with our own eyes.

Benton County is taking the lead on the recovery center, and Franklin County may join in. Benton County received \$2.75-million in the state capital budget passed this spring to site and design a recovery center. Our own legislative Representatives Matt Boehnke and Brad Klippert worked hard for this, as did Senator Sharon Brown. However, it took teamwork with representatives and senators from the majority party in Olympia.

Benton County's request, assisted by the Benton Franklin Recovery Coalition, was sponsored by representatives and senators from both political parties – a feat that is both rare and extremely strong. Going forward, it's really important that we keep the relationships and ties to both parties, listen respectfully to their concerns and advice, and show them that we in this region will partner with them to get results important to everyone.

Benton County also has applied to three federal funding sources, and funds from both of our counties may be added. All of these revenue streams virtually ensure that, as Benton County Commissioner Jerome Delvin recently stated, "this center is going to be built!"

So now the community must address how the center will be organized and managed. In our vision, certain things are imperative. First, since public funds will supply most of the money, the center must be publicly owned and managed.

Accountability demands it.

Next, a public advisory committee will be created to oversee policies and performance. Local experts in the fields of addiction and mental illness must have significant roles on the committee, because these are complicated medical diseases that involve brain chemistry and psycho-social dimensions. In addition, the advisory committee should include stakeholders who have lived with

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addiction and mental illness in their own families, and of course elected officials voted in by all of us. The advisory committee should report to the Benton-Franklin Health District, due to its medical and treatment expertise, diversity and public role.

Also, we expect that staffing contracts will be let with professional, experienced providers of mental health and addiction services from outside our region, but it's very important not to harm any of our existing local providers. We must ensure that cross-referrals and partnerships with local providers are strong, so that all of them prosper and grow.

Behavioral health (addiction and mental illness)

is receiving more attention and money than ever before. Olympia will be watching that we spend our allocations well. Good stewardship of public money, careful attention to the concerns of those funding it, an advisory committee reporting to professionals in our public health district, managers with a strong track record of financial success, and partnerships with new and local providers will give us the recovery center we all want and need.

Michele Gerber is President of the Benton Franklin Recovery Coalition, and parent of a young man who died of his addiction. She is retired from the Hanford Site.