

## THE PBJ INTERVIEW

# Keeping people out of his old venue

FORMER PROSECUTOR DWIGHT HOLTON'S NEW JOB FOCUSES ON PREVENTION

Lines for Life CEO Dwight Holton said his role is a perfect extension of the work he did as U.S. Attorney for Oregon. "I feel like this is a much broader platform to be able to work on the issues and challenges and opportunities that I care about."



CATHY CHENEY

**I**t may seem like a leap to go from being Oregon's top federal prosecutor to CEO of a nonprofit focused on substance abuse and suicide prevention. But as Dwight Holton sees it, the move was a natural one.

As a federal prosecutor for 15 years, including two as U.S. Attorney for Oregon, he personally put about 400 people in prison and supervised even more cases.

"Nearly every single one of those stories that ended in federal court at sentencing began with someone in mental health crisis or dealing with substance abuse or both," Holton said. "By definition, by the time a story comes to you, something bad has happened."

Now, instead of stepping into the story after a crime has been committed, Holton is focused on upstream intervention, trying to avert drug abuse and other bad endings in the first place.

Holton took over as CEO of Lines for Life in February. The Portland nonprofit runs four 24-hour crisis lines — an alcohol and drug helpline, suicide line, military helpline and youth line. It also has school-based substance abuse prevention programs.

**What made you want to make this move?** It's a seamless fit. When I was U.S. Attorney, I spent that two years trying to use the bully pulpit, which is significant, to insert the office earlier in the story, figuring out how we could prevent and intervene around substance abuse and mental health crisis to keep

## DWIGHT HOLTON

**Title:** CEO, Lines for Life, a Portland-based suicide and substance abuse prevention nonprofit

**Previously:** U.S. Attorney for Oregon; Democratic primary candidate for Oregon Attorney General, 2012; attorney at Lane Powell

**Born:** Roanoke, Virginia, Dec. 18, 1965

**Education:** Brown University, bachelor's degree in U.S. history; University of Virginia Law School

**Family:** Wife, Mary Ellen Glynn; children, Terence, 10, and Fiona, 8

**Volunteer work:** Oregon Convocation on Equality; Oregon Criminal Justice Commission; Governor's Fund for the Environment; Oregon Endangered Species Justice Fund

**Fun fact:** Holton's dad was governor of Virginia from 1970-1974

people from coming into the system in the first place. That's what we do here at Lines for Life.

**How hands on are you? Do you ever do a shift on the phone lines?** I haven't done the training to be on the lines, so I'm not qualified. I would love to do it some day. It's 56 hours of training, and really, you want to do more than that. It would be great to do. My role, if I'm doing my job right, is that I'm leveraging and expanding what these folks can do and empowering them to do more and better.

**In your short time here, have you made any big changes?** We're trying to build on the excellent foundation that spans back 20 years that Judy Cushing, my predecessor, built for this great organization. We're trying to do a couple of things in particular. One of my missions is to expand the prevention work. We've never been the kind of statewide organization we should be on the prevention side. We're changing that. We've already started work on a youth suicide prevention initiative in the Rogue Valley and in Linn and Benton counties. We are running a statewide Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force. We're going to eastern Oregon first. So we're taking what has been a fairly Portland metro focused organization and we're expanding statewide.

**Where has most of the growth been in crisis calls?** We run a military help line. That's been over 10,000 calls in

the past year. The volume has exploded in recent months. We used to take 200 calls a week. In September, we took over close to 400 calls a week.

**Why is that?** I don't have a good answer. Part of it is cyclical. But this year, the growth has been more dramatic. We've seen growth on the crisis line as well, but it's been sustained on the VA line since June. We're trying to figure out what's going on.

**What about when Robin Williams died?** Our busiest day ever was the day after Robin Williams took his life — 215 people connected with us on the crisis line and it was mostly people who were worried about a family member. We normally have 80 calls a day at that time of year. It was a real teachable moment for people to better understand what's going on.

**What are your thoughts on Measure 91, the marijuana legalization proposal?** We have real concerns about anything that expands the availability of dangerous drugs and intoxicants to kids, whether they're legal or not. We'll be looking at ways to ensure that the implementation is what the folks who advocated for it promised us. They said, "We will make this better regulated and harder to access for youth than it was before we legalized it." We intend to hold them to their promise.

**Were you dismayed it passed?** My view of this was I would much rather wait and see what happens in Colorado and Washington and learn from their experience. But you know, folks is folks, and we'll help make sure that we've got solutions in the new regime.

**Do you miss being a prosecutor?** What's great about this job is that while I still get to work with friends from the Department of Justice and DA's offices and police departments, I also get to work with a different group of people on the same issues. So I feel like this is a much broader platform to be able to work on the issues and challenges and opportunities that I care about.

**Did the fact that your father was governor influence your decision to go into public service?** You bet it did. We lived in Richmond, Virginia, in a neighborhood subject to busing. My parents sat us down and said, "Look, the judge says we don't have to do this, but you're being bused. You're going to be leaders. Show the adults that integration is not a big deal and wave of the future." It set a tone in my family all the kids tried to live up to.

— Elizabeth Hayes, @PDXBIZLiz