

Local advocate wins scholarship

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

Mandee Seeley of Sisters has won a scholarship from The National Alliance to End Homelessness to attend the sold-out 2019 National Conference on Ending Homelessness in Washington, D.C. In addition to covering her entrance fee to the conference, the organization will fly Seeley to the capitol, pay her hotel costs, and supply her with a modest stipend.

"I want to learn what other states are experiencing and their different methods of tackling homelessness," Seeley said.

She will attend the conference July 22-24, then bring back newfound knowledge to Sisters.

Dozens of workshops and talks will tackle the nitty-gritty of working with homeless, or "houseless," issues, as some prefer to call them. Subjects include "Rapid Re-Housing for Individual Homeless Adults: Veterans in the Lead," and "Ending Unsheltered Family Homelessness." The latter program promises to address practices, programmatic and system-level strategies to reduce the number of families living in cars or other places not intended for human habitation.

Another workshop delves into "Understanding Unsheltered Homelessness." Organizers say that over the

last five years, unsheltered homelessness has been on the rise "even though the overall number of people who are homeless has gone down" in the United States. The workshop will present emerging research in the field.

The conference occurs during Capitol Hill Day. "I will make sure that Central Oregon is represented during my visit," Seeley said, "as I will be speaking with members of Congress and their staff."

Seeley is an administrative assistant at Sisters Park and Recreation District. She volunteers at Habitat for Humanity, and joined the Vision Action Team for the Sisters Country Horizons Vision for the city of Sisters. She also initiated SPRD's Community Cleanup Day program.

She looks forward to learning from leaders and experts around the country. Seeley believes "we have an advantage here because we have a community with a huge heart willing to work on the issues."

One example is the Sisters Cold Weather Shelter committee, which Seeley has been on since its inception. A temporary shelter was initiated during the intense, snowy winter of 2016-2017. Before the shelter opened, an employee of McDonald's died in his vehicle from hypothermia in December 2016. Local citizens, businesses,

and churches banded together to provide meals and respite from the weather.

Many residents of Sisters Country have been supportive of these efforts. In February of this year, *The Nugget* reported "a great deal of support for the shelter evident" at a meeting about the cold weather shelter, "with people saying they are glad to know there's a place for the homeless to go, that volunteering is a great joy to serve, and that the time spent at the shelter with the guests is a positive experience."

Writer Sue Stafford reported, "Pastor Jerry Kaping of Westside said that in three years time they have not had one negative experience involving the shelter. The community has been supportive with monetary support, volunteer hours, meal preparation, and donations of needed supplies for the shelter and its guests."

Some citizens, however, have expressed concern with having a cold weather shelter in Sisters. Some have suggested shutting down or moving the shelter, which takes place in local churches that offer their facilities.

This attitude, nicknamed NIMBYism, will be addressed at the conference. The acronym stands for Not In My Backyard, and it represents an attitude that people sometimes have toward programs that might affect the area closest to their own



PHOTO BY T. LEE BROWN

Mandee Seeley watches her kids play in Deschutes National Forest near Sisters. The family, which is active in the Sisters community, has spent numerous months living in the woods without conventional housing.

homes.

"I have personally experienced this NIMBY mindset upon moving to Sisters," Seeley said.

In an effort to alleviate the housing crunch, a group met at the library to discuss potential ideas for a trailer park or tiny home park. Some homeowners showed up and "were very upset at us for even considering it," said Seeley.

Since moving to Sisters Country three years ago, Seeley and her family have spent many months unshoused

in conventional housing.

"People think those of us without housing are lazy and want to be in this situation, which isn't true for all of us," she noted. "Are there some who choose to live in the woods? Sure, but some of us have created a home for ourselves [in Sisters] and simply can't afford the walls to make it work."

"If we are going to tackle homelessness in our community, we need all community members on board and working together," Seeley said.

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