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Local hospitals see little support

National Guard members serve in Grant County amid virus surge

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — As cases of COVID-19 continued to rise in Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown on Aug. 13 issued an emergency order to deploy nearly 1,500 Oregon National Guard soldiers throughout the state to help support hospitals.

In Eastern Oregon, only the Blue Mountain Hospital District in Grant County has received any of those resources.

As of Friday, Aug. 27, several hospitals in Northeastern Oregon have not sent in a request for National Guard support, according to Oregon Health Authority officials. Those hospitals include CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande, Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston and Pioneer Memorial Hospital in Heppner.

According to an OHA spokesperson, Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City was one of the few hospitals to put in a request for guard members. The soldiers would provide support in clinical and nonclinical roles. The hospital chain — which serves Baker City, Ontario and Boise — requested six soldiers to assist in Ontario. It was not known how many soldiers were requested for the Baker City location.

Wallowa County on Aug. 25 requested Oregon National Guard support, according to Brooke Pace, director of communications and public relations at Wallowa Memorial Hospital. The request came 12 days after Brown's announcement about deploying Oregon National Guard soldiers to hospitals during the recent surge of COVID-19.

In Grant County, several members of the Oregon

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'That guy was a hero'

The story of a daily ritual, a fiery crash and a miraculous riverbank rescue



Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Dan Steele stands on the Upper Perry Arch Bridge in Perry, which he crosses most days on a quiet bike ride along the Grand Ronde River for a time of reflection and prayer as he remembers his late son. One day last month, he witnessed a vehicle go off Interstate 84 and plunge down to the river. He immediately jumped into action. "I believe my son's soul was with me that day," he said.

By TOM HALLMAN
The Oregonian

LA GRANDE — When his son was born in 1998, Dan Steele thought it was a miracle.

He was 47. He believed he'd been given the precious gift of a second chance, vowing to live in a way he hoped would one day make his boy proud.

Steele, born near Eugene and raised in Sisters, married young, a woman from Bend. They had a daughter but divorced before the child's first birthday. In time, he said, his ex-wife remarried and moved with the baby to another state.

He moved on, working in Montana and California before heading to Alaska, often in remote sections of the state, where Steele, a self-described loner, did some logging, fishing, trapping and, from time to time, a bit of construction. He eventually returned to the Lower 48 — living here and there, doing this and that — before putting down roots in La Grande where he was hired as a Union Pacific Railroad freight conductor.

"It was a rough transition," said Steele, now 70.

Steele worked the railroad's extra board, mainly night work, which meant waiting for a supervisor to call him at home to report. When the call came — and it could be with little warning — Steele was required to drop everything and be at the yard within 90 minutes to head out.

"I went from total freedom in my life to zero freedom," he said. "The issues in my life, the drinking and such, grew out of all that."



La Grande Rural Fire Protection District/Contributed Photo, File

Rescue personnel respond to the scene of a single-vehicle crash on Sunday, July 25, 2021. Four people were injured in the accident on Interstate 84 about 5 miles west of La Grande.

Steele had a stretch of time when the drinking, and what the alcohol brought out in him, led to arrests, citations and convictions in Union County for drunk driving and altercations.

'It broke my heart'

After the first busted marriage, Steele vowed never to marry again. But the heart doesn't follow the head. He met a woman. While they never married, they were together and she gave birth to a boy — Keegan Pierce Steele.

"Having my son," he said, "made me clean up my life."

Steele and the boy's mother lived separately. Because Steele would be gone for days on the train, the boy lived with his mother, coming to stay with Steele on his days off. He had dogs. Father and son hiked and fished and hunted together.

"He brought out the patience in me," Steele said. "He had a great sense of humor."

Keegan Steele eventually married, had two children and divorced, something that made Dan Steele think about his life,

the ups and downs, and the legacy a parent passes down to a child.

Steele retired from the railroad in 2014. Remembering how he liked the isolation in Alaska, he considered moving 125 miles away to a remote section of Grant County. But his son and his two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, were the most important people in his life. He couldn't imagine leaving them, but he wanted out of La Grande. He moved to Perry, a speck on

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 41 LOW Clear
 Sunday 84/50 Sunny and nice

CONTACT US

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TUESDAY

CLIMATE CHANGE'S IMPACT ON ELK

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