

OUR VIEW

Volunteers should have best equipment

Recently, rural fire departments in Imbler, Elgin, La Grande and Joseph received a big boost when they were awarded a \$344,000 grant for key equipment in a move that adds to the ability of the emergency services personnel to keep us safe.

The grant, issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, will be used to buy approximately 50 new air packs and 100 new air tanks for firefighters.

The upgrade in gear will replace equipment that is becoming obsolete. The effort was spearheaded by Ken Patterson, a member of the Imbler Rural Fire Department.

Patterson deserves a tremendous amount of credit for developing a plan to acquire the grant. The money also highlights what is a common element to rural communities across the nation: the reliance on volunteer, small fire departments to provide protection.

That is why those who volunteer to serve in such a capacity also deserve a lot of credit and praise.

Taking time to volunteer for anything in our busy lives is asking a lot. We all must face, and overcome, the daily challenges life delivers. Making the decision to slice out a section of time to volunteer — and especially to join a rural fire department — can look like a tall order.

Yet, we are fortunate that there are people who fill out the ranks of small fire departments like the ones that serve rural Northeastern Oregon.

These men and women are indeed extraordinary and that is why they should have the best equipment. The work of such emergency services personnel can often go unsung, until, that is, your home is on fire or we need help.

So that is why the grant for the new equipment is good news for local taxpayers. Anytime public money is spent for public safety it is a good investment. We want our firefighters and police to have the best equipment on the market so when there is a crisis, they are prepared and can react to ensure our safety.

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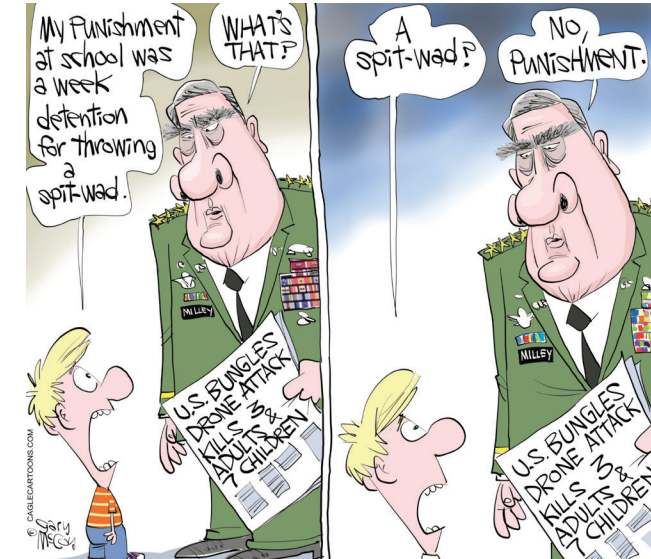
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Rights come with responsibilities



ANNE
MORRISON

THINKING OUT LOUD

We live in a society obsessed with rights and the sense of entitlement, demonstrated by how often we hear indignant expressions such as “he had no right to...,” or “...but that’s a violation of my rights.”

But lately I’ve been thinking about the unmentioned responsibilities that go with having rights. Doesn’t the right to vote imply a corresponding responsibility to be informed about civic and political issues? Or the right to possess deadly weapons suggest a responsibility to other people to keep and use firearms in a responsible manner? Doesn’t the right to free speech really require a responsibility to speak carefully and honestly regarding public issues?

Most recently, although we now have effective vaccines that limit the transmission and severity of coronavirus, we’ve been watching a parade of people express their “right” to refuse a vaccine, or to continue to go maskless.

My last substantive science class was 10th grade chemistry, and I suspect that most of these people have as little or less science education as I do. I am awestruck that so many people consider themselves scientifically qualified to question the ways in which vaccines were tested, or to second-guess the CDC’s recommendations.

But I also think about the indignation with which people assert their “right” to refuse a vaccine, or to wear masks, and their absolute refusal to consider their responsibility to other people.

If the only person put at risk by a person’s refusal to be vaccinated or to mask up is that individual — fine. It’s truly an individual decision. But if other people are put at risk — other children in a child’s class, people with health conditions that make getting the virus a particular danger, or health care workers who must care for the unnecessarily ill — it seems like the computation changes. At that point, in addition to considering one’s own rights, maybe people are also obligated to think about the effect that refusing to get the vaccine or to wear a mask may have on other people.

It’s the responsibility that corresponds to our right to make health care decisions for ourselves.

Earlier coronavirus “surges” were tragic because so many people became ill and died when little was known about this new virus and the means of preventing its spread. Now, we face a “fourth wave” with a mutated virus that is more deadly and more easily transmitted. More people are being hospitalized than during any previous surge. Younger people are falling ill and dying. And the tragedy of this wave is that many of these cases could have been prevented.

This week, a small Oregon hospital with limited medical services (similar to our own) was unable to transfer a seriously ill patient to any

major hospital in the Portland area because all of those hospitals were full. And the patient died. Who is responsible when people who refused a vaccine fill hospital beds, preventing other people necessary medical care? Increasingly, people are arguing that those who remain unvaccinated — who remain obsessed with asserting their rights while utterly ignoring their responsibility to others — bear responsibility for the preventable surge we are facing.

One of my friends is a retired scientist who lives in Spokane. He is an obsessive reader with boundless interests and always has interesting “fun facts” to report. Most recently, he commented that a new scientific study indicates that the delta variant of coronavirus is so widespread and transmissible that everyone who is not vaccinated will get coronavirus. It’s a chilling thought.

All of us with our 10th grade science educations are certainly entitled to critique the study’s methodology. But it becomes increasingly difficult to feel empathy when the same people who have refused to consider their responsibility to others get a serious, possibly deadly — and largely preventable — illness.

It’s becoming harder not to think that they brought it on themselves, and this new surge on us all.

Anne Morrison is a La Grande resident and retired attorney who has lived in Union County since 2000.

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Phone:
541-963-3161

Toll free (Oregon):
1-800-781-3214

Email:
news@lagrandeobserver.com

POSTMASTER
Send address changes to:
The Observer,
911 Jefferson Ave.,
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