

CHEER

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Shopping for family

This year's rendition of Shop with a Cop began with Hays aboard the Summerville Baptist Church bus, picking up 15 students in the morning and bringing them to Walmart, where law enforcement volunteers waited to help them pick out presents for their families.

The program is aimed to help students who might not otherwise be able to afford to buy presents, as well as kids whose parents or families may have had run-ins with police in the past. Each child is paired up with an officer for holiday shopping and a lunch break afterward.

The children shopped for toys, clothes and other gifts for family members on their list.

Karma Whitmore Smith hand wrote her Christmas list and picked out a variety of toys for family members alongside Deputy Tad Butcher, who has participated in the program for numerous years.

For many law enforcement members, Shop with a Cop is a regular holiday event that they look forward to. La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell participated in the event and picked out gifts with Ike Amundson. Officers Ryan Bernards and Dusty Perry were both in their fourth year of participating in the holiday get-together. Bernards shopped with Mason Hale from Greenwood Elementary, and Perry was joined by Jayden Eifort of La Grande Middle School. "It's good for the kids and nice to be a part of it,"



Karma Whitmore Smith and Union County Sheriff's Deputy Tad Butcher, a Shop with a Cop volunteer, search the toy aisles of Walmart for the perfect gift on Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021.

Bernards said.

This year's Shop with a Cop was a first for sheriff's deputy Talissa Baldovino, who helped Dakota Sain pick out a variety of gifts for her family.

Hays noted that a big part of the event is getting local youth to feel comfortable around law enforcement. Shop with a Cop participants ended the shopping trip with a surprise from their law enforcement partner — picking out a present for themselves.

Community support

According to Hays, the program has grown over the years thanks largely to buy-in from the community. When the event was first starting up, Hays leaned on other police departments from sur-



La Grande Police Sergeant Jared Rogers deciphers a list with student shopper Donny Turnbull outside Walmart in Island City on Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021, as the Shop with a Cop day gets underway.

rounding cities who conducted similar programs to establish Shop with a Cop.

In the time since, the event has grown in popularity and become a favorite in

La Grande for the many individuals involved. Walmart is a major

sponsor of the program, granting \$2,000 every year to go toward the gifts. The store opened its backroom, formerly the Subway restaurant, for gift wrapping and lunch. The children were given a Shop with a Cop backpack to take home, as well as a gift bag and gingerbread house kit.

About 15 volunteers took part in the gift wrapping, lining up stations for the purchased presents to be wrapped and then later delivered to the kids' homes. The wrappers included different groups within La Grande law enforcement as well as families of the officers. As a whole, roughly 35 volunteers contributed to this year's Shop with a Cop.

Carla Greenough coordinated the wrapping center and organized the donation efforts.

"A lot of the volunteers have taken part in years past and enjoy coming back every year," she said.

In addition to Walmart and donations from members of the community, sponsors of the event included Loveland Funeral Home, Domino's Pizza and Coca-Cola. Loveland paid for the pizza lunch, which participants and law enforcement were able to bond over after gathering holiday gifts.

While the event takes a lot of time and preparation, Hays noted that he hopes Shop with a Cop continues to grow and serve as a favorite among law enforcement and local youth.

"The support we receive from the community for this is what keeps it going," Hays said. "We've had so much positive feedback."

ODOT

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to a regional and nationwide labor shortage. With everyone competing for employees, many employers are boosting their compensation packages.

"It is hard to recruit when everybody is paying more. It is hard to compete," Clark said.

ODOT's problem is compounded by the fact that the road maintenance employees it needs must be skilled drivers with commercial driver's licenses. ODOT will provide the training needed to earn a CDL, but Clark said he would rather hire drivers who have experience operating heavy equipment before they start working in bad weather conditions.

Clark noted that all inexperienced drivers will be paired with experienced ones initially to help them develop skills.

"We will be taking them on training rides," he said.

He noted it is possible that ODOT road maintenance employees from other parts of the state could be brought in this winter to help with snow removal.

Another concern of Clark's is keeping a supply of replacement parts available for snowplows. This is important because replacement parts may be difficult to get quickly due to supply chain issues.

"We have been trying to stock up," he said.

Clark said he has talented workers who have multiple skills and he is optimistic things will go relatively smoothly this winter.

"We are very fortunate because we have very good employees," Clark said.

Safety first

Sipp said that anyone interested in working for ODOT this winter should contact the department.

"We want people to look to us for employment," he said. "We want people who will enjoy doing this every day."

Ken Patterson, area

manager for ODOT's Region 5, said motorists should be patient this winter since there may be times when snow will not be cleared as quickly as expected. He encourages people to avoid driving when conditions are poor. He said drivers should monitor ODOT's road cameras on its Trip Check website to make sure road conditions are good before they start a trip. Patterson noted that many additional cameras on I-84 between La Grande and Pendleton have been installed within the past two years.

Strandberg also pointed out that about a dozen message boards have been added between La Grande and Pendleton over the past two years. The message boards alert drivers to upcoming conditions, including the presence of snow, ice, fog, slow traffic and accidents. Strandberg also urges drivers to be patient and noted that it is never a good idea to pass a snowplow, especially because ODOT now has winged plows with blades on both sides. He said drivers who find themselves behind plows are actually in a good position.

"The best place you can be in a storm is behind a snowplow," Strandberg said, adding that drivers should never get too close to snowplows because they do make stops.

This winter ODOT crews will again be following the agency's Winter Levels of Service guidelines, which prioritize the roads that receive the most service. The guidelines indicate that Interstate 84 is to be given the highest priority in Union County, Strandberg said.

Regardless of where one is driving in this region, Patterson said it is important to understand that ODOT maintenance employees "take personal pride in what they are doing" and care enormously about safety.

"We all have friends and family who are also traveling and we want them to get to where they are going safely," he said.

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the tail end of conducting interviews and research.

"I spoke with the investigator and he is hoping to wrap that up pretty soon here," he said.

Weber noted that the Thanksgiving holiday caused a slight delay, but that the investigator has been collecting information for the past couple weeks.

The allegations drew concern from leading Democrats in the Oregon House of Representatives, who emphasized that House Bill 3409 was passed in 2019 to advocate for fair play and equality in high school athletics. According to The Oregonian, House Speaker Tina Kotek, House Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner and Rep. Janelle Bynum were a part of the statement. House Bill 3409 instructs OSAA to investigate complaints regarding racism and iron out the issue within 30 days.



La Grande quarterback Logan Williams runs past defenders along the sideline during a first-round state playoff matchup against Gladstone on Friday, Nov. 5, 2021.

The La Grande and Gladstone school districts worked together with OSAA to gather information from players, chain crews and officials. A statement from the three entities on Nov. 16 detailed ways that the districts are looking to mend the relationship between the two schools. A big emphasis has been promoting clarity on both sides during the investigation process.

"My understanding is that people at both schools have worked together with the investigator to provide

as much information as possible," Weber said.

The La Grande and Gladstone boys basketball teams are scheduled to compete against each other at the Gladstone Holiday Tournament at Gladstone High School on Dec. 20.

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