

# THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

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## Strong report for region's schools

NE Oregon counties beat state averages for graduation rates

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

EASTERN OREGON — It was a red-letter year for many Northeastern Oregon school districts, as numbers released by the Oregon Department of Education show that the majority of the region's counties beat state averages for graduation rates — even as graduation rates fell from 82.6% to 80.6% across the state. Similarly, rates across Northeastern Oregon fell as well, with Baker County seeing one of the largest drops in graduation rates for the area, falling from 84.7% to 77.9% — a 6.8 percentage-point drop from last year's graduation rates. The rest of the Northeastern Oregon counties — Umatilla, Morrow, Union, Wallowa and Grant counties — registered an above-average graduation rate.

### Leading the way

Grant, Morrow and Wallowa counties topped the list with more than 92% of their respective cohorts graduating during a pandemic year. Morrow County School District in particular shined with a staggering 96.6% graduation rate for the district. School administrators credit the push for in-person learning — as opposed to distance learning or remote classroom environments — as a critical factor for success in rural classrooms.

"I would say one of the things we were fortunate with in Morrow County is that we were able to stay in person more than other school districts around the state," said Morrow County School District Superintendent Dirk Dirksen. "We made a real effort to get into the limited in-person instruction as soon as we can, and just try to maximize every opportunity for the doors to be open."

Knowing that a significant portion of rural communities are without stable internet access, school districts across Northeastern Oregon had given out mobile hotspot devices for students to use at home, as well as Chromebooks to access online coursework.

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## Cultivating community confidence



### Blue Mountain Humane Association making strides in second year under new management

By DAVIS CARBAUGH  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The end-of-year numbers are in, marking two years of new management at La Grande's Blue Mountain Humane Association. After years of poor management, one of the shelter's board's biggest goals is rebuilding trust with the local community. Alongside that mission, the Blue Mountain Humane Association is ramping up its efforts to provide the best possible care to the animals that come through its doors.

"I think our biggest challenge, in the first year especially, was just trying to get the public to trust us again," board member Rebecca Lord said. "We had to overcome so much bad juju from the previous administrators."

In 2021, the Blue Mountain Humane Association recorded more than 900 intakes, of which 621 were cats and 275 were dogs. Looking back on the past year, the kitten season from April to November was larger in 2021 than most years. Through partnerships in the region and escalated caretaking procedures at the shelter, BMHA's operations are running much smoother as the shelter continues holding itself to a higher standard.

### Winning back trust

After years of the previous management team creating a poor reputation at the Blue Mountain Humane Association, new board members and staff do not blame citizens of Union County for any skepticism toward the shelter. With that being said, the organization has improved the shelter



Photos by Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group. File Blue Mountain Humane Association Board President Beverly Beach pets Drama, a cat up for adoption, at the Blue Mountain Humane Association shelter on Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021. At top, Delanie Moad, a member of the staff at the Blue Mountain Humane Association, handles a litter of black kittens during intake and vaccinations.

by leaps and bounds as it seeks to provide the best possible service with its available resources.

Beverly Beach, president of the BMHA's board, noted that the facility was used as a kill shelter from the mid-1990s up until around 2012. In addition, the shelter was being lived in by the former president. The new board is now faced with the task of making the best out of limited supplies and outdated equipment.

"This place was a mess," Beach said. "The dog kennels are kind of small compared to what you would see in a newer shelter. The dogs rarely had any time outside. That was one of the things we instituted

immediately. Every dog gets outside every single day."

According to Lord, "We found the books (from the past) and they were euthanizing dozens of animals a day. All cats that came in if they were feral, pregnant, sick or black were euthanized. All pit bulls were euthanized. They'd hold them for the minimum amount of time, which I think was three days. We started reading these records, and it was so depressing."

Upon taking over the shelter, Beach and the new staff hauled off roughly 10,000 pounds of scrap metal, vehicles on the property and about 20 pickup loads of garbage. As part of the ongoing improvements at the

facility, Beach said the board has gathered enough funding for a new exam room and that an intake room is one of the next items on the agenda.

A lack of record keeping proved costly early on, as medical and financial records are crucial in acquiring potential new funding.

"When we took over, there were no protocols or programs for the animals. There were 45 cats here and none of them had medical paperwork or even names," Lord said. "It took us the first full year just to start putting everything in place to move forward. We were just really trying to figure out how to set all the protocols."

### Turning the corner

As the new board and staff continue to build back trust with the community, the need for volunteers and donations is still paramount.

"We're super reliant on volunteers," said Claire Hanson, an employee who manages the shelter. "Normally there are three staff members here every day, two people fully devoted to animal care, because it takes that much time to rotate the dogs through the yard so they all get time outside and so we can get all the cleaning done."

Union County Animal Control is a major resource for the Blue Mountain Humane Association, Beach said.

"We love working with them. They have been so amazing," she said. "They always have the welfare of the animals and the welfare of the shelter in mind when they're doing things."

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## Off to a promising start

Blood donations in La Grande have been up the past two years

By DICK MASON  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande is continuing to defy a national trend in blood donation.

A total of 224 units of blood were collected at a two-day American Red Cross drive in La Grande on Tuesday, Jan. 25, and

Wednesday, Jan. 26. This puts La Grande, where four more two-day blood drives will be conducted this year, on pace to collect 1,120 units of blood in 2022, a mark that would be 155 units greater than the 965 units collected at American Red Cross blood drives in La Grande in 2021 and 477 more than the 2020 La

Grande mark of 643 units.

"We had an outstanding start and exceeded our goal because of amazing community support," said Sheldon Strand, who coordinates La Grande's American Red Cross blood drives with his wife, Linda Strand.

The increase comes at a

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Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group Phlebotomy technicians with the American Red Cross work with donors to collect blood during the American Red Cross blood drive held at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in La Grande on Tuesday, Jan. 25, 2022.

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### CONTACT US

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TUESDAY

THE BATTLE OF THE LASAGNAS

Online at [lagrandeobserver.com](http://lagrandeobserver.com)