

Search training near Baker City goes on despite soggy conditions

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Mannequins, fortunately, don't mind getting soaked.

They're immune to hypothermia, too.

Those attributes helped keep a major search and rescue training exercise going despite heavy rain on Saturday, April 30, in the forest near Phillips Reservoir.

About 50 search and rescue team members from six Eastern Oregon counties gathered for the annual training, said Ashley McClay, public information officer for the event's host, the Baker County Sheriff's Office.

Baker County search and rescue members were joined by their counterparts from Union, Wallowa, Malheur, Gilliam and Umatilla counties, McClay said. Those six counties, along with Grant, Harney, Morrow and Wheeler, constitute the Eastern



Incident Commander Brian Belnap, front left, of the Malheur County Sheriff's Office, talks with team leader Nick Vora, of Union County, Search and Rescue, front right, during a search training exercise on Saturday, April 30, 2022, near Baker City.

Ashley McClay/Contributed Photo

Oregon Search and Rescue group.

Participants spent the weekend at Union Creek campground on the north side of Phillips Reservoir about 17 miles southwest of Baker City.

The initial plan was to have a

ground search, involving a live "victim," as well as a rope rescue, involving a mannequin, both on Saturday, followed by a second ground search on Sunday, May 1, McClay said.

But with rain forecast, orga-

nizers decided to replace the live subject of the search with a pair of mannequins, simulating a father and son who failed to return from a trip to the woods.

"We didn't want to have someone sitting out in the cold and

wet for several hours," she said.

The rain also delayed the rope rescue since the showers made the rock cliff slick.

Instead, searchers, after finding the two mannequins during the ground search Saturday in the Old Auburn Road and California Gulch area north of Highway 7, returned to the campground and welcome meals provided by retired Baker County Sheriff Terry Speelman.

On Sunday, with the skies having cleared, the rope rescue exercise took place, but the second planned ground search was canceled, McClay said.

In addition to the ground searchers, teams from Umatilla and Malheur counties brought aerial drones to participate in the training.

The annual exercise shifts among the 10 counties in the region. This was the first time Baker County has played host since 2015.

VFW

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building at 518 N. Main Street in Union for interest meetings.

"Hopefully they'll want to make the organization grow into what the VFW or American Legion is," McCormack said. "We're going to give them free rein of our post. It would be their post to do with, per say, as long as it doesn't conflict with what we're doing."

The group has already met several times, scheduling monthly meetings for prospective members. While Post 4060 is providing the space, the new group will not be officially associated with the VFW.

McCormack noted that the new group will be entirely member-run, most likely electing a president and other positions to lead the group.

Once the organization structure is established, the group can begin organizing more events and



Davis Carbaugh/The Observer

The VFW Post 4060 on North Main Street in Union is sharing its building as well as its support with a new service group for first responders and all military veterans. The new group meets on the fourth Monday of every month and will be entirely member-run.

fundraisers down the line.

"This group would have its own set of bylaws and its own officers," McCormack said. "We're in the infant stages. We're just trying to get people to come by and talk to them right now."

VFW Post 4060 Com-

mander Larry Forrest said he is hopeful the new group can draw a younger crowd who may not be familiar with the VFW or may not be aware of resources available. Forrest noted that the VFW has connections with professionals experienced

in helping frontline service workers and former military members in dealing with PTSD.

According to Forrest, the two groups can easily coexist in the future through events and resources. He said the

Union VFW is hoping the new group will become recognized as a community asset that is available to veterans and first responders.

Just months into the process of creating the new group, prospective members include individuals

MORE INFORMATION

The new service group for first responders and all military veterans will meet next at 4 p.m. on Monday, May 23, at the VFW Post 4060 in Union. The group is planning to meet on the fourth Monday of every month moving forward.

from the Union Interagency Hotshot Crew, out-of-state law enforcement officers, veterans who did not serve overseas and members of the Union County Sheriff's Office.

"The biggest thing is going to be getting all the first responders together, selecting a set of officers, creating a set of bylaws and then listing it as a nonprofit organization," McCormack said. "We've got a lot of things we need to do once we get the members together."

He emphasized that groups like the VFW and American Legion are crucial for veterans in dealing with the trauma that can often stem from their experiences in the military.

"The first responders all at some point in their life will run into the PTSD problem," McCormack said. "The idea of this group is for first responders to also be able to get together and talk with each other and try to help with the PTSD."

DEBATE

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opportunity to react to what their opponent had to say."

The candidates — Anderes and Hill — both said they are excited about the chance to get in front of

voters to make their cases.

"I think the more informed people are the better choices people make," said Anderes, 60, a former educator who is seeking his



Anderes

second term as county commissioner. "I think this is a good opportunity to visit with folks about what I've been doing and what we've been doing as the



Hill

county for quite some time."

"Hearing the concerns and issues firsthand from my community will be insightful and beneficial," said Hill, 68, a La Grande resident and a business owner. "I hope the debate will be a positive experience for everyone."

Insko said he's hopeful for a full house in Huber Auditorium on May 6 and would like for EOU to be a regular stop for similar events at all levels of government.

"This whole thing kind of started not only because we wanted to give our community members an oppor-

tunity, but I had a few governor candidates reach out to me, wanting me to host the governor's debate here," he said. "We didn't want to do a primary (debate). We decided to wait on the governors until you have two party candidates chosen already."

GUENTERT

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praised her effort fronting the agency, calling her an "invaluable teacher" and a person who leads by example.

Guentert began as a front office assistant in 2007. She also spent time in transportation before moving into her county manager role in 2014. Knowing as many of the ins and outs of CCNO is valuable, she said.

"Learning the program from the ground up and growing up within the agency, it has given me such a well-rounded perspective of what this agency does for all the communities that we operate in," she said. "It is so diverse."

Guentert said the decision to step into the executive director role is one that required a deep internal look.

"I loved my job as the county manager," she said. "Did I want to drive to La Grande every day? Yeah, it was a lot of inner reflection. Did I want to take that step and continue on in the wonderful culture and leadership that Margaret has (not only) led by example (but) really infused through our entire agency? It inspired me to step up and have the opportunity to continue the culture, the foundation of our agency, (and) the family of it."

Guentert will continue to live in Wallowa County, staying in an area she has grown to love, and will make the commute on a daily basis.

"It's a beautiful drive," she said. "It's enjoyable. It's time to reflect on what you've got going on in the day. When you're home, you're present for your family. It also keeps my feet in that neck of the woods."

I've loved raising my family there and living there. It's home."

Guentert said she doesn't plan to make any alterations to the way Davidson operated CCNO, instead wanting to continue the legacy the longtime executive director built.

"I am definitely going to operate it the same way she has," she said. "Being present in the future, what our counties need, that is why we're here. We're here to serve people."

Her replacement at Community Connection Wallowa County is still being determined. Guentert said she hopes that spot is filled by mid-May.

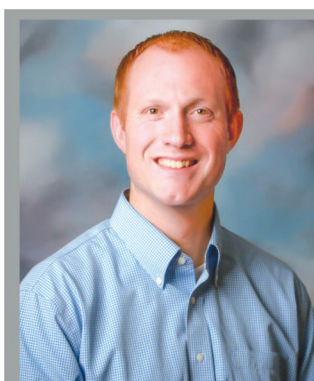


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