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campers live.

Jim gets out, enters the lock's combination, opens the gate, then closes it after the trucks pass through. The lock's combination is a closely guarded secret. The volunteers never share it with the people they help.

According to the agreement between COVO and the Central Oregon Irrigation District, the volunteers will open the gate to allow a homeless person to drive out of the land but never to drive back in. Unable to easily leave, the choice to live on that land becomes a tacit commitment to stay.

They drive on a gravel road that runs parallel to the canal, kicking up dust. Within minutes of driving, they've left the city behind. All that can be seen are the road, juniper trees and sagebrush. It is quiet, save for the sound of the occasional car, a gust of wind moving through the trees or raindrops pelting packed dirt.

There are no road signs, no sense of direction, just endless juniper trees and narrow dirt roads connected to one another with little rhyme or reason.

The volunteers rarely get lost. Len uses the GPS in his truck, which draws a thin blue line of where they drive.

"It's just a trail in the sand," he says.

The camps are far from one another, often beyond eyesight of each other.

"This area is kind of a perfect place for the homeless," Len says. "They can spread apart, not bother each other. And they're close enough where they can ride a bicycle into town."

The first man they visit lives in a small camper van tucked in a stand of juniper trees so thick that the van is completely hidden from view until the trucks round the last turn on the road.

A tall, slim man walks out to meet them. His hands are stuffed inside the pockets of a hoodie, and he keeps his head down. With the exception of "hello," he hardly says a word.

Len carries a couple of full garbage bags to the trash trailer while Roy and Merv fill a bag with supplies. As they do so, Jim,



The camp compound where Joy, Joe and Bill live.

PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

clipboard in hand, writes down some basic information, which COVO uses for record-keeping and grant applications: the person's name, last four digits of his Social Security number and which supplies he is given.

The whole interaction lasts less than five minutes.

"It took a long time for him to talk to us," Merv says. "He's reclusive."

He is one of many campers who have taken time to warm up to the COVO volunteers. The campers are happy to have their trash picked up, but creating a relationship and rapport, in some cases, take time.

"They're real leery of other people coming into their lives," Len says.

Merv says one camper would not talk to him at first.

"Now, he talks all the time. Which is good," Merv says. "It takes a while for people to believe that you're trying. It's hard living out here."

Despite the inherent misery undergirding

their work, the men have a fun time. Roy and Len often tease each other about their trucks: the loud diesel engine of Roy's and the size of Len's.

"You back out," Roy says to Len. "I'll stand here and laugh."

They successfully back out and drive down a dirt road, passing two large abandoned camps. They are complete messes: collapsed tents, blue plastic tarps left in piles, bikes, mattresses and random bric-a-brac piled together.

Camps are abandoned, Len explained, because people move to a different spot or into housing. The abandoned possessions, which quickly turn into garbage, are left for a simple reason: "They can't carry it."

The COVO volunteers never clean abandoned camps. They also don't help people move their camps.

They drive up to a large camp made from two tents pitched next to each other and covered in tarps strung up to posts and nearby juniper trees.

An older man, bearded and wearing camouflage pants, greets them. He, like many of the campers, expects them. The bags of trash are ready, and a 10-gallon water jug lies on the ground near where the volunteers park.

He has a couple of small solar panels for power, as well as an antenna, which he built, that allows him to pick up television stations.

Many of the campers are similarly resourceful. They have generators for electricity, propane heaters for heat and cooking, televisions and other amenities to make their lives comfortable. They've adapted to living outside in the elements for the long term.

The next camp is hardly more than a large tent nestled around large sagebrush and juniper trees. Roy drives his truck up, but no one comes out to greet them.

They drive on, pulling up to a large camp

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