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could be delivered to them. Since school's been out, I've been coming about every week. I've only got two more visits because my grandkids have to eat, and it's summer."

Nora Bean, pantry manager at Next Chapter, estimates that 40 percent of all Ontario residents visit food pantries regularly. While the number of SNAP benefit recipients has steadily decreased since 2013 nationwide, Malheur County saw a 4 percent rise from last year.

Community members often line up an hour before the pantry opens.

"The end of the month is always the busiest because they're toward not having any food stamps left," Bean said.

Food insecurity, a lack of viable public transit and education, and a shortage of affordable-housing options leaves Ontario lagging behind many comparable rural communities in Oregon. The clientele of the food pantry – diverse in age, ability, ethnicity and religion – reflect the culturally rich community of Ontario itself, and yet simultaneously reflect the universality of issues that have long plagued the region.

The city of Ontario proudly occupies the river-lush high desert and sprawling ranchlands along the easternmost edge of the state in Malheur County. Several major highways, including Interstate 84, connect the community to nearby towns in mere minutes on either side of the Oregon-Idaho border in an area known locally as the Treasure Valley. The Snake River, which divides and winds along the state border, is one of four major waterways.

On the Oregon side of Snake River, the absence of a sales tax makes Ontario a popular retail hub, and the county's minimum hourly wage of \$10.50 appeals to workers from Idaho, where the minimum is only \$7.25. By contrast, the Idaho side of Treasure Valley boasts far more lax land-use regulations, which, in turn, have encouraged more commercial and housing developments.

Ontario's ties with Idaho are so strong that local television and radio programming is broadcast from the Gem State, and most of Malheur County operates on Mountain Time, rather than Pacific. Despite proximity to Idaho and the city's thriving economy, Ontario residents and Malheur County, Oregon's second-largest county by area, are among the poorest and most economically disadvantaged in the state.

Ontario is also at the crossroads of two of Malheur County's three "high poverty hotspots," the Census Bureau's label for concentrations of poor residents. East Ontario, a neighborhood within Ontario, has as the highest rate of poverty in all of Oregon.

From 2011 to 2015, 25.5 percent of the people in Malheur County were living in poverty – a rate far above the state, at 16.5 percent, and the nation, at 15.5 percent – according to a 2017 report prepared by the Department of Human Services' Office of Business Intelligence and the Office of Forecasting, Research and Analysis, part of DHS and the Oregon Health Authority.

Furthermore, census figures from 2016 show 38 percent of residents of Ontario living in poverty.

And when comparing the cost of housing in rural Oregon to rural households across the country, the Oregon Office of Economic



Dancers perform a Basque dance during the Tradition Keepers Event and Exhibit at the Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario, Ore.

PHOTO BY
CELESTE NOCHE

A haven for immigrant families: How it got there

Diversity runs deep in Ontario

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

Heartily doused barbecue pork sliders, Indian fry bread, and stewed chile verde filled the plates of hungry guests at the Tradition Keepers Event and Exhibit. The June celebration, hosted by Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario, Ore., honored the region's rich cultural roots, with dishes from each to boot.

In addition to cuisine, hands-on workshops and lectures, Four Rivers invited taiko drummers, Paiute dancers and cowboy poets to perform in the main lobby beneath four soaring paintings depicting the area's most significant ethnic groups: Mexican, Japanese, Basque and Native American.

Although Oregon is noted as one of the nation's whitest states, cities such as Ontario in Malheur County disrupt that

narrative. As the largest city near the Oregon-Idaho border and the largest in the county with an estimated population of 11,009 residents, according to the U.S. Census, Ontario is among the 10 most diverse cities in the state.

The annually updated Census program approximates the city's demographic makeup to be 54.5 percent non-Latinx white, 41.7 percent Latinx, 4.4 percent multiracial, 1.7 percent Asian, 0.7 percent Native American, and 0.4 percent African-American. In comparison, 75.8 percent of Oregonians identify as non-Latinx white.

"Where Oregon Begins" is the city's proud motto, but diving into Ontario's own historic beginnings reveals a story of migration and a story about how Ontario itself became the truly multicultural community it is today.

Decades before the weaving highways, sprawling homesteads and big-box stores of Ontario were built, the land was home and

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Analysis found that rural Oregonians are facing home prices 30 percent higher and rents 16 percent higher than their counterparts on average.

A broken system

Like many places across Oregon and the U.S., Malheur County and Ontario are experiencing a severe housing crisis. But beyond following suit with national trends in rising housing costs and stagnant wages, the county faces other difficulties. In late spring, the Housing Authority of Malheur and Harney Counties suddenly announced that the Housing Choice Voucher Program, commonly known as Section 8, had caused the agency to enter a budgetary shortfall.

"We are experiencing a deficit in money (due to) the fact that we've had an extreme amount of people that have come in from other areas, be it Idaho or California or the East Coast, because our Section 8 housing voucher's wait list was very, very minimal," said Kristy Rodriguez, Housing Choice Voucher Occupancy Specialist at the local housing authority. "It was only like three to six months or a year maximum wait as opposed to these higher cost areas that are years and years to wait. Word got out, and

(people) moved into our jurisdiction."

Across the United States, more than 2 million low-income households receive Section 8 rental assistance administered through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, but that's only about a quarter of all people who would be eligible for services. The average wait time for Section 8 vouchers nationwide is more than two years. In Portland, the Section 8 wait list was last open in September 2016 and is estimated to stay closed for a minimum of three years. In some cities, such as Los Angeles, the wait time can exceed a decade, which is why Ontario's short wait list appealed to a large number of people in need.

When eligible applicants are approved for a Section 8 voucher, they are required to reside in the county granting the voucher for a minimum of one year. While on the wait list, applicants can live in a different county but must relocate to the granting jurisdiction to receive rental assistance upon approval. After one year of receiving rental assistance, Section 8 recipients may move to a different county and receive assistance from the original county for another full year.

"They (could) go back to California or go back to Boise, Idaho, if they wanted to. There was no way for us to restrict that unless we were in a shortfall status," Rodriguez said.

"A lot of our money and our vouchers have gone out to other areas where other housing authorities aren't able to pick up the bill. Now, if any families are requesting to transfer out of our jurisdiction, they may transfer only if the other housing authority is willing to issue them one of their own vouchers and actually pay for their assistance. And there's a big housing barrier now where we're not able to issue housing vouchers to anybody. That puts a damper on our current residents who are living here and are poor and are homeless."

Section 8 rental assistance allows low-income tenants to afford housing units of their choice. The amount of each Section 8 voucher depends on the applicant's income level and what's considered suitable for the local fair-market rent set by HUD based on available units.

In Malheur County, the fair-market rent of a two-bedroom apartment is \$697 per

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