

HERMISTON

Homeless population ticks up, services strain to keep pace

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

The homeless population of Umatilla County hasn't changed much in the last two years, but the state's numbers have gone up, creating a growing need for shelter and funding.

This year's point-in-time homeless count showed a 12 percent increase in Oregon's total homeless population, to about 13,953 people. The last count, in 2015, was about 777 fewer people. The survey also found that homeless youth made up about 12 percent of those surveyed, or about 1,731 people. The state did show a nine percent decrease, or a drop of about 121 people, in the population of homeless veterans from the previous survey. The survey was conducted by Oregon Housing and Community Services in January.

In Umatilla County, the survey showed the homeless population at about 55 people, from 52 counted in 2015. Thirty-six are aged 24 and up, and about 31 are male and 24 are female. The data was also broken down to include sheltered and unsheltered homeless people.

There are several places in Umatilla County where the homeless can get help, but the need still exceeds available resources.

The Hermiston Warming Station operates in the winter months. The station can house about 22 people, and sees many different clients come through during cold weather.

Trish Rossell, the president of the warming station, said overall she has seen fewer homeless people in Hermiston than previous years. But she said the warming station is the busiest it has ever been.

"Last year, we served 70 individuals," she said.

The warming station will be at 1075 S. Hwy 395 again this year, and will be open each night this winter.

Of the 70 people they served last year, Rossell said about half have since found permanent housing.

There is a core group that Rossell said the warming



Two homeless Hermiston men leave the Hermiston Warming Station from its downtown location in December 2014. EO file photo

station sees each year. But most, she said, stay there because of a temporary need for shelter.

"Most are people in a rough patch," she said. "They may have a house where the heat is turned off, or are in between housing."

"It's the last safety net, if they have no sofa to sleep on," she added.

At Hermiston's Agape House, those in need can get food, as well as coats, blankets and sleeping bags in the winter. They offer a shower facility for the homeless, which costs \$1.

Dave Hughes, who has been the executive director of the nonprofit since 2002, said he hasn't seen a recent rise in the homeless population.

"But it hasn't gone down any," he said.

Hughes said of the people they serve who are homeless, about 60 percent are continually living in the Hermiston area, while the rest seem to be in and out.

He said there's no simple answer for why people are homeless.

"The major thing is that we don't have enough housing, period," he said. "Until that problem is solved, I'm not sure we will have a real answer. It's going to take a number of units that serve the low-income portion of the market to solve that problem."

The Agape House also

operates Martha's House, a facility that houses seven to 10 families without homes. Recently, Hughes said, the facility also began considering single women for the program.

But Hughes said there were other issues, as well.

"The general population looks at the homeless stereotype as one type," he said. "That population is as diverse as any other population."

The reasons for homelessness, he said, can span a temporary lack of funds, mental illness, or a transient lifestyle. But for each of those things, he said, there's a unique solution.

"It's very difficult to find a champion for each of those," he said.

Another issue, he said, is that most agencies have a different definition of "homeless," and those seeking aid often run into technicalities that prevent them from getting help.

"If you're staying with a friend, some agencies will say you're not homeless because you have a place to stay," Hughes said. "And then you can't apply for their programs until you're homeless."

"There's not a generally agreed-upon definition," he said. "If we could get to that, I think we'd be making some inroads."

The Oregon Legislature in 2017 set aside \$40 million

in funding to support the Emergency Housing Assistance program and the State Homeless Assistance Program, which help find people temporary housing while they look for permanent places to live. They also approved \$1.5 million to aid homeless veterans.

But local organizations noted one group that's still neglected — those displaced because of mental health issues.

"Even if we have the money, there's nobody for them to see," Rossell said. "And some have progressed so far, they need supervision."

Rossell said there have been many positive changes in the community for homeless people. She recognized Jason Estle of Desert Rose Ministries, who has been active in trying to create jobs for those who have been homeless.

But she noted that many still view homeless people with disdain.

"Our biggest challenge is recruiting volunteers and overcoming the stigma," she said. "People on Facebook will say, 'If they'd just get off their lazy butts.' You can't if you have schizophrenia."

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CTUIR board leaves marijuana off ballot

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Due to an editorial error, the first three paragraphs of this news story were omitted from Tuesday's paper.

Marijuana will remain illegal on the Umatilla Indian Reservation for the foreseeable future.

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation spokesman Chuck Sams said no members of the Board of Trustees seconded a motion made by General Council Chairman Alan Crawford to put marijuana up for a referendum during a closed tribal session Monday. That means tribal members will not vote on legalizing cannabis in the upcoming Nov. 14 general election.

The board also did not take action on a referendum to approve a tribal life insurance policy that would have allowed members to purchase

\$50,000 in insurance from the tribal government.

A call to the Board of Trustees was directed to board Secretary Kat Brigham, who declined to comment. Crawford did not return a request for comment as of press time.

Under tribal government, the General Council is comprised of every tribal member over the age of 18. The General Council votes for its own officers as well as the members of the nine-seat Board of Trustees.

In an interview before the meeting, Woodrow Star, a member on the board, said some tribal members have been interested in legalizing marijuana since the state did it several years ago, although the tribes' uncertainty on federal prohibition of the drug kept it from moving forward.

"It was more or less a wait-and-see," he said.

PENDLETON

Residents complain of strange water smell, taste

By EMILY OLSON
East Oregonian

In the last week, Pendleton's Public Works Department logged seven complaints of water tasting and smelling like algae or mold.

That's an unusually high number according to Klaus Hoehna, Pendleton's water regulatory specialist. Before this week, the staff had not recorded a complaint in eight months.

Hoehna said his team is scratching their heads over the complaints. They've done additional testing and everything looks normal.

It's standard procedure to follow each complaint by sampling the water for Coliform bacteria. If present, it could indicate the presence of bacteria that cause waterborne illness, like E. coli.

"In every case we've had a Coliform-absent response," Hoehna said. Water contamination in Pendleton is highly unlikely — the local water wells and treatment centers are highly secured and carefully monitored with up-to-date technology, Hoehna said.

Hoehna believes a likely culprit for lower water quality is the homeowner's lack of preventative maintenance. Older water heaters can leave corrosion deposits. Dirty faucet filters, which Hoehna recommends replacing or cleaning every 3 months, can lead to a dirty taste. Stagnant lines, like those in a bathroom that isn't used daily, can produce stale water, filled with a non-harmful bacteria that produce a moldy odor.

The Public Works Department anticipates a greater number of complaints during

the Umatilla River's high water events. The city pulls water from the river when there is sufficient volume, and that water has a muddier taste to discerning palates. But Hoehna said the city is mostly pulling from groundwater at the moment.

Alison Moses, who lives on SW Issac Street, said the funky smell started at the same time the city put water usage restrictions in place due to the unforeseen outage of two wells earlier this month.

"The city water has ruined two Brita filters," she wrote in an email to Tim Smith, the city's water superintendent.

"The water has a moldy pond flavor and scent and we have heard the same problem from many people near us and across town. We have been buying drinking water at the store since the filters aren't working."

Moses said she and her family have been feeling dizzy and lightheaded — she's not sure if that's from the water.

Hoehna said the issues with the wells has only decreased the water quantity, not quality.

Some residents speculated the taste results from a new water line near NW 6th street. The line was replaced as part of routine maintenance, Hoehna explained.

"Even before we test it for Coliform, we have the line chlorinated and flushed," Hoehna said. The department waits for the results before turning the line on for users. The test came back Coliform absent.

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PENDLETON

City, Quezadas make a deal over old city hall

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

The Quezada family and the city of Pendleton have a tentative deal over the old city hall. City attorney Nancy Kerns said the settlement means the parties will not go to trial.

An explosion in June 2015 damaged much of the nearly-100-year-old building at 34 S.E. Dorion Ave. and killed Eduardo Quezada, a member of the family. Per city law, the Quezadas had to repair the fire damage within a year, but that did not happen. The city council voted Jan.

3 to declare the building a nuisance and began fining the owners \$500 per day.

The Quezadas contested the fines in municipal court, and the trial was to start Wednesday morning in municipal court. Kerns said she could not disclose the terms of the deal, but the city

council meets Tuesday at 7 p.m. and could discuss it in a closed-door session.

Any action the council takes on the deal, however, has to be in public.

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

BRIEFLY

Hermiston council approves raise, extension for city manager

HERMISTON — The Hermiston City Council unanimously approved amendments to the contract for City Manager Byron Smith that will give him a \$5,000 annual raise and extend his contract a year.



Smith

The action came Monday night following an executive session to discuss his performance over the past year.

The contract amendment includes a one-year contract extension through Aug. 28, 2019 and an increase of \$5,000 per year to his base pay.

That will give Smith, who was hired as city manager in 2014 with a base salary of \$115,000 a year, a new base salary of \$137,000.

"We appreciate your service to the city," Mayor David Drotzmann told Smith after the unanimous vote. "It's been a challenging year."

Smith spent much of that year serving as chairman of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center board, which completed construction on new facilities that host the Umatilla County Fair and Farm-City Pro Rodeo.

Power out Tuesday morning in Boardman

BOARDMAN — Umatilla Electric Cooperative lost power Tuesday morning to much of Boardman, but it was restored after about an hour.

Steve Meyers, the cooperative's member services administrator, said the failure happened at about 8:45 a.m. at the substation at the Port of Morrow and affects 633 customers. Those include the port and Riverside Junior-Senior High School, which

started the new school year Monday. Meyers in an email said workers restored power at 9:56 a.m.

"There will be a follow-up to determine the cause," he said.

Hermiston police warn of attempted kidnapping

HERMISTON — Hermiston police asked residents for information about a possible attempted kidnapping.

The department took to its Facebook page Monday night to report that a stranger grabbed a teenage girl at about 5 p.m. at Belt Park near the intersection of Southwest Seventh Street and West Pine Avenue near West Park Elementary. She told police she believed the man tried to get her into his car.

"She was able to escape, unharmed, and contact the Hermiston Police Department," according to police.

The department described the suspect as a white male, about 5 feet 9 inches tall, balding, with facial hair and noticeable tattoos on his arms. He may be associated with a dark-colored Toyota Prius or similar vehicle.

Investigators coordinated with the Hermiston School District, according to the statement, and the investigation is continuing. Police encouraged anyone with information to immediately call the Hermiston Police Department at 541-567-5519.

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