



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Letitia Kidder stands in the living room of her home with Rock, her nine-year-old boxer, on Thursday in Hermiston.

HOMELESS: Christopher Stade lost his house to fire

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she was hired at O'Reilly's Auto Parts, where she is still working.

"I have a good job," she said, but it wasn't enough to keep up with mortgage payments.

Kidder said she has a place to go temporarily, and she is trying to save up enough money to buy a fifth-wheel trailer. Finding another place to live is more challenging because she owns dogs, goats and a horse.

"My animals are my saving grace," she said. "And yeah, to move out of my house, I first have to find a place that will take two big dogs."

She has found a farm in Power City to keep the horse and goats.

She has a trailer in mind, one that belongs to the nephew of her friend. The trailer costs around \$8,000, which Kidder said will take her a while to save up.

"I have a paycheck today, and I've got to go buy animal food," she said. "Then in two weeks I get another paycheck, and that's my plane ticket to go see my son graduate from boot camp."

But Kidder is still counting herself luckier than many.

"She's always been a trooper," said Kidder's longtime friend Roberta Boylan. "She's had a ton of bad luck."

Inside Kidder's home, half her belongings are in boxes, and the rest are strewn around as she determines what she can take with her. Her two dogs clamored at her feet as the Weather Channel played in the background.

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— Letitia Kidder, of Hermiston

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Need help

Unforeseen circumstances have displaced other locals, too, many of whom take to the Walmart parking lot in Hermiston to ask for help.

On a freezing Monday afternoon, an old woman sat in a wheelchair and a young man stood a few feet away holding a sign.

Christopher Stade, formerly of Kennewick, said someone set fire to his house in September, while he and his girlfriend were still inside. They escaped but lost most of their belongings. Since then, they have been driving around the region, trying to collect enough money to keep the car running at night while saving for a temporary place to live.

"We don't have family that can help us, so we've been traveling wherever we can find help," he said. "We're about \$100 short of getting an RV."

Stade said he had a job at a moving company in Kennewick before the fire, but he decided to leave everything behind to get away from the

relatives of the person who burned their house down.

Standing nearby, a 67-year-old woman who asked to be identified only as "Nana" sat in a wheelchair.

"I feel ashamed," she said through tears as late afternoon temperatures dipped into the low 30s.

Nana, a longtime Hermiston resident, has been homeless for several months, but she said it wasn't always her situation.

In the fall of 2016, when she was living in low-income housing, Nana fell ill and had to be admitted to Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland.

According to her friend Susan Dickens, while she was in the hospital her landlords decided they couldn't hold her space and put her belongings in storage, leaving her without a home.

Nana said she was working with the ConneXions program at Good Shepherd, but they tried to place her in a rest home in another city.

"They said it was the only option I had because I can't walk," she said. "Instead of just sending me around here, they were going to send me to Portland or Spokane where I wouldn't know anybody."

She likened the process to being asked to come up with a whole new existence.

"I should choose where I

want to go, not just to a rest home where they're counting the days until you're going to pass," she said.

Nana stayed for a short time in a Hermiston foster home, but was forced to leave after methamphetamines were found in her system and room. She said she has no idea how they got there.

After that she began staying in a motel in Hermiston.

"I've been doing everything myself," she said.

She said ConneXions paid for one week's stay in a motel, but since then she'd been funding it with her own savings — which she has now exhausted — and has now been standing in front of Walmart several days a week to earn enough money to finance the next week's stay.

She said she usually gets between \$30 and \$60 per day when she stands outside but still feels embarrassed by the stigma of being homeless.

"I'm not a drug addict," she said. "I don't smoke or drink. I just want enough to pay for a motel."

She recalled the many things she's done in her life, such as working as an X-ray technician, teaching beauty and barbering, teaching piano and voice, and directing choirs.

She said there are many people like her who have become homeless through difficult circumstances.

"I don't want this to happen to other people," she said. "It's a shame it has to happen at all."

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STUDENTS: 'They're in survival mode'

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were below the state average, with 1.1 percent of students qualifying as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act, the federal guidelines for student homelessness. Pendleton also fell below the state average, with 2.9 percent of students qualifying.

Lisa Depew, Hermiston School District's homeless liaison, said 25 students in the district qualified as homeless this year.

She said at the beginning of the year, secretaries are usually able to assess whether a student is in an unstable living situation and can then refer them to the counselor to further determine their needs.

The district then works with state and local agencies to provide certain services for students, such as free lunches, transportation services, clothing and school supplies. Even if a student doesn't qualify under the federal definition of "homelessness," in a small community they can often still receive those services.

"Maybe it's because we're rural and small, but we wrap around a kid," she said.

She added that they try to provide some other services at the secondary school level as well, such as waivers for sports participation fees or testing fees.

But she said there are certain things on which the district can't spend money designated for homeless students, including shelter.

"We don't go there," she said. "Unfortunately, we don't have a shelter, and one area that is sorely needed is affordable housing. Our care coordinator will attempt to assist with that."

InterMountain Education Service District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said the number of homeless students is increasing because institutions are getting better at identifying them, rather than a rise in overall youth homelessness.

Mulvihill said the IMESD combines its money with Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. and Umatilla County to provide its Wellness Hubs programs. In addition to providing services like oral health, nursing and mental health to students in need, Mulvihill said one of the most important parts of the programs is the ability of care coordinators to go visit homes.

While phone calls used to suffice, Mulvihill said having a staff member visit a student's living situation gives educators a better

way of assessing homelessness and what the student needs.

Julie Smith, the Pendleton School District director of special programs, said student homelessness spans a variety of scenarios.

Youth who live in cars, parks, homeless shelters, transitional housing, hotels or motels, or doubled up with family members or friends because of some sort of hardship, are also considered homeless in the eyes of the state.

Pendleton provides many of the same services as Hermiston, but student homelessness remains an impediment to learning everywhere. Without a stable housing situation, there isn't much time for homework or reading.

"They're in survival mode," Smith said.

Stanfield Secondary School counselor Kirsten Wright said that while the district keeps information about homeless students confidential, teachers often have some awareness that a student is in need, and will try to help make things easier.

"Grades are a huge concern," said Wright, who attended a training this week about homeless students. "I think our teachers, even if we don't tell them (a student is homeless), are really good at providing accommodations."

But she added that it is a burden for students in unstable living situations to prioritize classes.

"Sometimes they have younger siblings and need to be caretakers," she said. "It takes away from getting to be a student and getting to participate in extracurricular activities."

Wright recalled a student who graduated last year who was sharing space with another family because her own living situation was unstable.

"She was still financially on her own for a lot of it," Wright said.

She added that the student gave birth right before her senior year, and still had a few classes to complete.

"One accommodation we gave was we shortened the day," Wright said. "It was to ease the burden of not only homelessness, but needing to work and provide for the baby."

Wright said the student completed her education successfully, the first in her family to have a high school diploma.

"She had to overcome a lot of barriers to achieve that, so that was huge," she said.

TAX: Hotels worried about competition with Walla Walla, CTUIR

Continued from 1A

morning in Hermiston, Elfering said tourism is part of economic development, but the county's tourism coordinator Karie Walchli has not had adequate funding to do "much of anything" other than conduct meetings. More money would help promote ways to get more "heads in beds," he said.

But hoteliers asked why it was always hotels that bore the brunt of tourism assessments when it was also restaurants, gas stations and stores that benefited from tourists spending money in town. Another tax would cut down on their ability to raise rates to pay for rising minimum wage and still stay competitive with hotels in places like Walla Walla and the Tri-Cities, and on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Multiple hoteliers said in today's world — where hotel prices across the region are available with the touch of a button — travelers will often call and ask a hotel to match a price of a competitor in another city offering rooms for \$10 less. If the answer is no, they don't make a reservation.

Steven Arrasmith, manager for the Holiday Inn Express in Hermiston, added that the majority of travelers who stay at his hotel are trav-

eling for work reasons, not tourism, and said he would want to know specific details about how the money would be used.

Members of the Pendleton-area hospitality industry said Pendleton has always had a "gift for partying" and they would rather continue to trust Travel Pendleton to promote that. Travis Lundquist of the Pendleton KOA said during Friday's meeting that when he first came to the KOA, the only time it would sell out was the week of Round-Up.

"Through events Pendleton is bringing here, we are no longer selling out one week a year, we are selling out all summer long," he said.

During Thursday's meeting, questions were raised about why there was no "Travel Hermiston" or "Travel Milton-Freewater" to handle tourism promotion without the county needing to get involved. Greater Hermiston Area Chamber of Commerce board president Josh Burns said the chamber had approached the city about putting together something like that in Hermiston and was told that the city wasn't interested in spending the money when tourism wasn't a "big draw" for the city.

Tracy Bosen of the Pendleton House bed and break-

fast said he didn't want to turn the issue into an east side versus west side problem, but it was important for the county to be equitable in how it collected and divided funds.

"We'd love to help Hermiston," he said. "We know if Hermiston picks up on things, we're going to benefit. But Hermiston needs to be in the driver's seat first."

After Elfering's announcement Friday that the county would not pursue the transient lodging tax, conversation turned to other ways that tourism successes in Pendleton could be duplicated in other parts of the county. Attendees agreed that occasional meetings between hoteliers and others in a position to promote tourism in the region could be useful, and Beard passed around a makeshift sign-up sheet to collect contact information.

"Use this energy you have here today," said Alice Trindle, executive director of the Eastern Oregon Visitors Association.

Bosen said he appreciated the fact that the county had backed off after getting negative feedback.

"Thank you for listening," he said. "Thank you for actually hearing those concerns."

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