

Donations: Christmas Express delivers hundreds of meals, presents

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She checked off a list of 350 families and individuals in need, who were recommended by the schools, Department of Human Services, Head Start and local churches.

As families filed in, the children gravitated toward the pile of stuffed animals in the corner, while the parents perused the tables of hats, gloves and stocking stuffers. Each family also got to take home a jar of oatmeal cookie mix, and wrapped presents for each of their children. After collecting toys and gift boxes inside, visitors drove to the back of the Agape House building, where volunteers Doug Alvarez and John Carraher loaded boxes

of food into cars.

Jan Maitland, an Agape House employee, said if someone was not on the list, but came looking for food or gifts for their children, they were asked to come back on Wednesday.

“We want everyone to have something,” she said.

Volunteer LaVera Sanchez said one of her favorite memories was from last year, when a woman came in after being recommended for the program.

“She didn’t know how her name got on the list,” Sanchez said. “But she couldn’t say ‘thank you’ enough. She was crying, she was very appreciative of everything.”

Two women who stopped by on Monday said the program has helped their fami-



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Volunteer Ginger Haley sorts presents for 6- to 8-year-old girls for the Christmas Express on Monday at Agape House in Hermiston.

lies during some rough times.

“I just moved down from Alaska,” said Cheyenne Blazka, who found out about the program through her child’s school. “It’s really heartwarming to move and

start fresh, and see that people still care.”

She said her kids were excited about the presents, but she was most grateful for the food donations.

“Food stamps don’t

always cover everything,” she said. “It really helps.”

Stephanie Bates got donations from the program last year.

“We’ve been so down,” she said. “It’s awesome we could get gifts for the kids.”

“It helps keep Santa alive,” Blazka said.

In its 49th year, Christmas Express gathers donations from community groups and individuals, packages them up, and sends them to the Agape House. In addition to the items collected for Christmas donations, the program yielded about 8 large crates worth of food that Agape House will be able to distribute throughout the year.

Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said the pro-

gram received about \$6,500 in cash donations as of Monday, and that the donations from school food drives were the largest he’d seen in the 15 years he’s been doing Christmas Express.

He said in the past few years, employees from other city departments have joined the police department. They gather at the Hermiston Community Center, everyone boxes food or wraps gifts, and then shares a meal afterward. About 90 people showed up at the community center last Tuesday, and it took them an hour and a half to package everything.

Sanchez said it takes at least six people per day, working from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., to get donations out to the community.

Watchdogs: Many ignoring mandate of internal auditing

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minutia of an agency’s processes and programs.

Earlier this year, for instance, internal auditors employed by the Oregon Department of Corrections, found the agency had no practice to alert Verizon when an employee left the department.

When auditors looked back five years, they found the state spent \$41,466 on phone bills for people no longer employed with corrections. Often times, the phone was no longer in use, but Verizon continued to bill because it wasn’t told of the separation.

An in-house watch dog can provide advice beyond catching such problems.

“We’re here, we are available,” said Marlene Hartinger, chief auditor for the Oregon Department of Transportation. “If there is a non-audit activity, that is a smaller portion of what we do. We can’t take action, but we may review draft policies.”

When Brown released her budget in November, she proposed 14 new internal auditors to safeguard against noncompliance, fraud, wasteful spending and mismanagement.

Under state rules, agencies with at least \$100 million in biennial expenditures, \$10 million in annual cash on hand, or at least 400 full-time employees need to have a state internal auditor. Thirteen agencies who fit those standards don’t comply.

Among them are the departments of veterans affairs, justice, agriculture, environmental quality, business development,

state lands, military, water resources. Other state agencies that by rule should have the internal watchdogs are Oregon Liquor Control Commission, Oregon Housing and Community Services, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, the Public Utility Commission of Oregon and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

Racquel Rancier, senior policy coordinator for the Water Resources Department, said the department only recently met the requirements for an auditor. She said it hit the benchmark in 2016 and a year later was given a waiver. The agency is now proposing such a position in its 2019-2021 budget.

Donald Oliveira, spokesman for the Department of Environmental Quality, said the agency lacked funding and the Legislature didn’t authorize such a position in the first place.

He said Director Richard Whitman supports adding one, though, and thinks it would help the agency meet its core functions.

In 2007, the state had 53 auditors, but today there 32, according to the state audit. The Secretary of State’s review earlier this year concluded such a decrease creates the perception Oregon didn’t care about the internal audit function and hurt the ability to hire auditors.

Under Brown’s proposal, all 13 agencies would get the internal watchdogs and one more would go to the Department of Administrative Services to oversee the program.

That’s important because in Wednesday’s

hearing, legislators and Secretary of State auditors said the Department of Administrative Services often failed in its oversight role — something Director Katy Coba didn’t take protest. Coba is also the state’s chief operating officer.

“Audits haven’t been a priority in Oregon,” Coba said. “DAS hasn’t effectively monitored, coordinated, or reported on internal audit function impacts, challenges and resource needs to state legislators.”

Coba said there is a lot of work to do, but she’s up to the task. Committee Co-chair Sen. Betsy Johnson, also co-chair of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, said it wasn’t Coba’s fault.

“DAS has been a mess for two decades, so I am not blaming you,” Johnson said, adding Coba is capable enough to right the ship.

However, Johnson said if the necessary fixes aren’t implemented, she doesn’t want the blame to fall on a council or agency. She wants to be able to “yard” in one person that the Legislature can grill.

“Madam co-chair, that would be me,” Coba assured her.

The Department of Transportation has 10 internal auditors. Seven look into the department while three scrutinize contractors. It currently has two vacancies.

Hartinger said to be effective, auditors must be independent and objective.

“We have to be separate from the programs we are auditing,” she said.

In a recent audit, Hartinger found the Transportation Department could

do better paying its contractors on time by properly filling out payment reports and establishing a way to catch and address past-due invoices.

The agency told its own auditors that it would implement two new electronic programs to track payments.

Hartinger said agency auditors now are busy looking into new projects brought about by the massive 2017 transportation package. Auditors are reviewing the bidding process, doing risk assessments and tracking late payments to contractors.

When improvements are suggested, auditors then hold agencies accountable for implementing the change, she said.

But Sen. President Peter Courtney wants more accountability. Specifically, he wants agencies to be accountable to the Legislature. After Kip Memmott, the Secretary of State’s audits director, finished his presentation on the review of the internal audit system, Courtney started thinking aloud.

Slow: Cabbage Hill poses challenges for big rigs in winter

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Bud Stephens, of the Tri-Cities, echoed that sentiment. He provides third-party testing to truck drivers in Oregon and Washington. Crosswinds more than 40 mph can topple a 53-foot-long trailer, and if that trailer is empty, it’s “just a big sail boat going down the road.” In that kind of wind, he said, he tells drivers to stop and wait it out.

Like Borger, he also said, slowing down is the key for drivers to keep control and stay safer when coming down Cabbage Hill.

Stephens said drivers should use engine braking rather than mashing down on the brake peddle. That means shifting into a lower and thus slower gear as you start down the mountain.

“You don’t shift going

down the hill,” he said. “Stay in one gear.”

Then as the vehicle accelerates, ease down on the brake peddle to slow 5 mph at a time. Don’t keep your foot on the brake for a long time, he said, and don’t press it to the floor. In semis, this keeps the brakes from heating up to the point they stop working.

“Those are the two things a driver must do on a long, steep downgrade,” he said.

The method also applies to cars, pickups and minivans with automatic transmissions as much as the big rigs.

Borger added she understands the pressure truckers are under to make their unloading and loading appointments, but the No. 1 priority on the road should be safety.

“Vehicles can be replaced,” she said. “Your life can’t.”

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