

Food: 'Once you've been a soldier, you know what it's like'

Continued from Page A1

to go for people who need it — for veterans or their families — means a lot," she said.

Burger said she was contacted by AMEN to help distribute food boxes throughout Eastern Oregon, as the organization recently began to expand its food distributions beyond the west side of the state.

"I'm really proud of us for being able to do it and I'm very honored that we can be this staging place," she said.

AMEN, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, began as an outreach organization with Damascus Community Church in Damascus in 2005, according to its website. In 2019, the nonprofit distributed 2,309 food boxes, as well as providing financial support, meals and other donations to veterans and their families.

Brook Blake, whose father founded AMEN, was among a pair of volunteers delivering the food to the Pendleton VFW. Blake, an Air Force veteran, said it is a "blessing" to be able to help his fellow veterans.

"The amazing thing is if you really want help, it's there," he said. "Once you've been a soldier, you know what it's like."

As a show of goodwill for the generosity, Burger said the VFW donated money to AMEN to help cover the



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Members of the Pendleton VFW Let'er Buck Post 922 and representatives from the American Military Encouragement Network unload a pallet of donated food boxes at the VFW post in Pendleton on Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021.

cost of transporting the food to Pendleton, and she and other members of the VFW will help to distribute food further east in the coming days and weeks.

"It's just a matter of communicating with the veterans organizations or anyone who deals with veterans who might be needing it," she said.

'If we have to, I'll find someone to deliver them'

Harold Roberts, the commander for the Hermiston VFW Desert Post 4750, said he picked up 10 boxes of nonperishable food for members of the Hermiston post and hopes to provide even more should he find additional people in need. "I'm going to take these

down to the post, contact the people that wanted them and let them know they're available," he said. "If we have to, I'll find someone to deliver them."

Roberts said he knew there was need in the community, but was unsure of how to best find people to distribute the boxes to. Roberts made a post on the VFW Facebook page

and reached out to various community groups.

Through his outreach, Roberts said he received a call from Ione VFW Post 95 Commander Brian Rietmann looking to see how Ione could arrange to pick up food boxes as well. Rietmann, who picked up six boxes, said it may take some convincing to pass the help along to those in his

community, but he was grateful to be able to offer it.

"I'll probably have to fight with some of them to get them to take it," said Rietmann. "But it helps those families that are in need."

Roman Olivera, the director of the Student Success Center at Blue Mountain Community College, was among the first to show up and pick up food boxes for student veterans at the college. Olivera picked up seven boxes of nonperishable food and three boxes of perishable food to distribute to veterans at the college.

"To BMCC students, it is another avenue of resources to help our veterans," he said. "It doesn't just isolate them, it pulls us all together."

Olivera, who works closely with veterans attending the school, said he sees being able to provide the food boxes as a way to reach out to veterans who may be struggling and unwilling to ask for help.

"From my point of view, some veterans don't come forward and say, 'I can use this,'" he said.

Olivera went on to add that the boxes allow him an opportunity to start building relationships with students and say, "here, we have this for you," without requiring them to seek out the help directly.

"I am so appreciative of the VFW and AMEN for providing this to our students and to our public — our community as a whole," he said.

Increase:

Continued from Page A1

less to deduct from your state taxes.

The Legislative Revenue Office estimates Oregon will collect an additional \$103 million this year, and \$9 million in 2022, from taxes generated by that stimulus money. That's 3.6% of the \$3.1 billion in stimulus money that Oregonians received.

That tax hike won't hit everyone, though. Low-income Oregonians with no federal tax liability won't pay more in state taxes, and some high-income residents with large federal tax bills won't pay, either.

The more people earn, generally speaking, the more they will owe — but even some Oregonians earning under \$50,000 a year will owe \$100 in additional taxes. That's a hefty chunk of their stimulus payments.

(The calculations of who will owe, and how much, are complex and vary considerably based on taxpayer income and family status. See some detailed examples from the state here.)

While stimulus payments from 2008 had a similar effect on Oregonians' taxes, few people anticipated the pandemic relief payments would generate additional costs. And few people appear to have set aside money to cover the costs.

Congress intended the stimulus payments to be tax free, according to U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Springfield.

"It is unconscionable to ask those working families who have struggled the most during this crisis to bear the weight of the state's budget shortfall," DeFazio wrote in a letter to Gov. Kate Brown and legislative leaders last week. He asked them to relieve Oregonians of those higher taxes.

Oregon State Sen. Dick Anderson, R-Lincoln City, plans to introduce a bill to protect Oregonians' stimulus checks from state tax implications.

"The sole purpose of federal stimulus checks was to give people help when they needed it the most," Anderson said in a statement last week. "There is no justification for the state to be taking some off the top. Helping people get back on their feet means helping them keep more money in their pockets."

Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athens, said he does not think it's right for the state to tax the stimulus payments, and there seems to be support on both sides of the political aisle to tackle the matter. He said Anderson's bill is under review and likely to drop no later than early next week. The thrust of the proposal, he said, would give refunds on next year's taxes.

Gov. Kate Brown's office said she is interested in an "overall conversation" about the effects of stimulus programs on Oregon taxes. Spokeswoman Liz Merah said the governor wants to consider the question of stimulus taxes in the broader context of how federal relief programs have impacted Oregon's budget.

Other elements of the programs, she said, have reduced Oregon's tax revenues and more changes could be coming with a new relief bill now before Congress.

"The governor's goal is to ensure that we're targeting state financial aid to the neediest families who have been hit hard by this pandemic," Merah said.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, appears to be open to a fix to the stimulus tax. Her spokesman, Danny Moran, said the House Committee on Revenue is evaluating the issue and the speaker is "looking forward" to receiving feedback from committee Chairwoman Nancy Nathanson.

But Rep. Nathanson, D-Eugene, noted that Oregon law requires that tax changes go into effect 90 days after the end of a legislative session — which is currently scheduled for June, well after the April 15 tax deadline. Many people have already started filing their taxes, so Nathanson said she is examining when the state can modify tax returns.

"I'm looking for options that can get help to people who need it as easily and quickly as possible, given timing constraints of changing the tax laws," she said in an email. "There's time for this Legislature to consider separate action related specifically to the 2021 tax return. In other words, we are looking at one approach for helping people this year and a different approach for next year in order to help Oregonians who need it most."

La Grande Observer editor Phil Wright contributed to this report.

Birds: Walmart to donate 4 pallets of birdseed

Continued from Page A1

"Nobody got hurt and the birds are OK," she said. "It could have been worse."

Tompkins has a call into OBC Northwest in Canby about replacement costs. It's her hope the costs don't soar too high — she's guessing around \$5,000 or possibly as high as \$10,000. In addition to the damage to the Scavenger Pen, the roof on the Songbird Pen, which is smaller, partially collapsed. While its top needs to be replaced, Tompkins said it's still usable in the interim.

Always grateful and forever the optimist, Tompkins is confident resources will be provided. She wrote about the damage in her weekly newsletter and posted a link to it on the organization's Facebook page. In addition, she said several media outlets have reported on the loss.

"It will probably be a challenge but people are already responding," Tompkins said about the fiscal impact. "I'm confident it will be rebuilt."

By Wednesday afternoon, Feb. 24, \$1,600 had already come in for the project. In addition, Tompkins received a call last week from the Walmart Distribution Center regarding a donation of four



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Blue Mountain Wildlife Executive Director Lynn Tompkins indicates where the Scavenger Pen at BMW was damaged as a result of heavy snow during a tour of the facility on Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021.

pallets of damaged bags of birdseed.

Tompkins said plans are being formulated to accept donations during a drive-thru bird feed giveaway in March. Finalized details will be posted on the BMW Facebook page and website.

Founded in 1990, BMW is dedicated to wildlife

rehabilitation, research and public education. A Thursday, Feb. 25, virtual Winter Birds 2021 series presented by Mid-Columbia River National Wildlife Refuge Complex in conjunction with the Friends of Mid-Columbia River Wildlife Refuges features Tompkins sharing about the work the facility

does. It can be accessed via a link at www.friendsof-mcrw.org.

Blue Mountain Wildlife's main facility is located at 71046 Appaloosa Lane, Pendleton. For more information, contact 541-278-0215, lynn@bluemountainwildlife.org or visit www.bluemountainwildlife.org.

Surge: 588,698 Oregonians vaccinated so far

Continued from Page A1

months, barring further delays from the state or federal government. Currently, the public health department is only planning events in Pendleton, Hermiston and Milton-Freewater, but he said vaccination drives in smaller towns could start once supply starts to balance out with demand.

Fiumara said doctor's offices and pharmacies will also start to play a bigger role in vaccinating Umatilla County, but many will need time to build out their capacity to administer vaccinations as they continue to tend to patients' everyday health needs.

In the meantime, the county is seeing success with their current vaccination clinics.

Fiumara said the county is anticipating to vaccinate nearly 1,900 people across three days this week, including those that are getting their second doses.

"It's been a very busy week," he said.

At the same time Umatilla County was holding its events, health officials at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation spent Tuesday, Feb. 23, and Wednesday, Feb. 24, vaccinating nearly 1,000 people at the Wildhorse Resort & Casino with the help of the Oregon Army National Guard.

With many tribal members already covered in previous rounds of vaccinations, much of the event's focus was on non-American Indians who lived or worked on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

With the CTUIR being Pendleton's top employer, and one of the top employers in the region, Fiumara said he was happy to learn about the number of new residents being vaccinated. Previous to the Feb. 26 announcement, the county had only received that many vaccines in one week once before.

"As far as I'm concerned, every arm that gets a vaccine is good," he said. "However we get there, we're happy about it."

Near the bottom for vaccination rates

The increase in doses comes a week after the county saw its vaccine supply halted due to inclement weather, forcing health officials to postpone drive-thru clinics planned to bring shots to the arms of hundreds of residents. Officials have routinely said the county could be vaccinating hundreds more people each day, but a variety of hiccups and canceled shipments have for months inhibited the county's efforts to immunize the community against the pandemic.

The latest increase in doses also comes as the county is moved from the extreme coronavirus risk category to high risk for the first time since the state started the four-tiered risk categories in December 2020. Case counts have dropped in the county in recent weeks, and after the state announced on Feb. 23 that it had mishandled months worth of data from county health facilities, Brown's office approved an appeal from county officials

allowing it to move to high risk.

The change allows indoor and outdoor recreation, entertainment, and shopping and retail establishments to reopen at limited capacity. It also allows faith institutions, funeral homes, mortuaries and cemeteries to reopen at limited capacity. Lastly, it allows indoor and outdoor visitation at long-term care facilities and only recommends, rather than requires, that office work be done remotely.

Umatilla County has vaccinated 7,532 residents since vaccine efforts began in late December 2020, with 4,191 of those being second doses, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority. That's 928 people vaccinated per 10,000 residents, which places the county at the second lowest vaccine rate in Oregon for the second consecutive week.

In Oregon, 588,698 people have been vaccinated against COVID-19, with 317,267 of those being second doses, according to state data.