

Firefighters

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close friends or my family or anything, I've just always had a heart for that so I decided to look into firefighting."

He asked his cousin, Jason Donahue, a firefighter in Spokane, for advice. His cousin showed him the station and took him on a few ride-alongs.

"And that's when I really fell in love with it," Donahue said.

The program consists of structural and wildland firefighting along with emergency medical services and CPR. One day the interns may be learning how fires behave in the wild, while other days they'll be throwing ladders and hooking up fire hydrants.

The interns all noted how many of these lessons and activities have become competitive, which in turn has pushed them to be better firefighters. Couch, of Rigby,



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Umatilla County Fire District 1 Battalion Chief Corey Gorham, second from left, talks to a group of interns Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2021, at the fire district's Hermiston training facility.

Idaho, said one of his favorite activities was competing with the other interns to see how fast they could put on their gear.

"It's turned into kind of like a friendly competition between everyone," he said, "and that's probably the thing that I like the most."

One training opportunity, in particular, turned espe-

cially competitive and lasted seven-and-a-half hours, according to Dillon Tucker, who was born and raised in Sisters. To become certified to drive an ambulance, each intern had to pass a driving course with cones.

"It was a long, grueling day," Tucker said.

According to Geddes, who moved to Hermiston from

Maple Valley, Washington, they all struggled with driving the ambulance in the beginning. They couldn't figure out what they were doing wrong until one person did it right, she said.

"We had to go through our cone course three times without knocking over any cones or touching any cones," Geddes said. "So every time somebody did it right, it was like the biggest celebration. They'd jump out of the truck just flailing their arms."

These moments accumulated, cementing the links each intern has with the other and with firefighting.

"That bond we have together makes it a lot more fun and it definitely balances out the hard work and makes the hard work fun," Donahue said.

He mentioned that while it's nice to have three days off every week, they already miss the program by Sunday and are excited to go back on Monday because they

have so much fun.

For Tucker, becoming a firefighter was a decision to follow in his father's footsteps. He had known Richard Cearn, Umatilla County Fire District 1's division chief of EMS and training, through his dad, who is a member of the fire service. After visiting and sitting down to talk about it, Tucker said that he realized UCFD probably would be the best place for him.

Tucker said he loved the family aspect of the fire service and the community they've built. The bond with the community, he said, makes him excited to be there.

"Everybody's excited to go fight fire and help people," Tucker said.

Geddes, meanwhile, fell into the program after moving to the area to attend Blue Mountain Community College for its rodeo team.

Before moving into the station full time, Geddes brought a dog and two horses to the area and lived out of

her horse trailer since 2019. She spent last winter helping a family ranch in northern Idaho, living in sub-zero temperatures in her trailer, "which was absolutely terrible," she said.

After finding out about the EMS program at Blue Mountain, Geddes was told about the fire internship program by one of the career firefighters at Umatilla County Fire District.

"I had a long talk with my instructor in the back of the ambulance talking about this program," Geddes said, "and it was like the next day I put in my application for it."

On top of being a resident intern, Geddes works at Dutch Bros. Coffee in Hermiston and goes to school full time. She spends the rest of her spare time with her (now three) horses and attending rodeos. She said she'll fall asleep for two to three hours then wake up to repeat the process.

"Definitely," she said, "the exciting life that I needed."

Census

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that if we could run ZIP-code level numbers yet and include growth outside of city limits, the percentage attributed to the entire "west side" is probably well over 80%."

Pendleton had a more modest growth rate of 3%, but Pendleton Mayor John Turner said that was the right amount of growth based on the city's current infrastructure.

"We don't want to grow too fast," he said.

Around Umatilla County, many small cities saw solid growth.

While the city of Umatilla's growth slowed from the previous decade, it still grew at a 6.6% clip, while Stanfield also posted a growing population. Both Athena and Weston rebounded to post positive growth after the first decade of the 21st century had them losing people, while Milton-Freewater's growth slowed considerably to 1.4%. Just north of Pendleton, Helix and Adams

2020 CENSUS BY THE NUMBERS

- **Hermiston's** population is 19,354, 15.6% more than in 2010.
- **Pendleton's** population is 17,107, 3.3% more than in 2010.
- **Umatilla County's** population is 80,075, 5.5% more than in 2010.
- **Morrow County's** population is 12,186, 9.1% more than in 2010.
- **Morrow and Umatilla counties** have the highest share of residents under 18 in Oregon. But like the rest of the state, the share of children fell from 2010 to 2020.
- **More than 1 in 4 residents** is Latino in Umatilla County.
- **41% of Morrow County's population** is Latino, the highest in the state.

posted successive decades of growth.

Most of Umatilla County's population struggles lay south of Interstate 84. Echo, Ukiah and Pilot Rock all lost people compared to 2010 and, for the latter two, it represented the second decade in a row that they shrank.

George Murdock, the chair of the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners, said Umatilla County's 80,075 population was less than he expected.

"I would have to attribute it to the housing problem," he said, adding he would expect Umatilla County to post

similar numbers to the Willamette Valley once it adds more homes.

The north-south divide is even more stark in Morrow County, which now has a population of 12,186.

Boardman and Irrigon recorded strong growth from 2010, while Heppner, the county seat, lost population for the second consecutive decade. Lexington's population stayed flat at 238, while Lone gained eight people.

But south county losses weren't enough to overcome the gains in the north, with Morrow County's growth percentage representing the highest

growth in Eastern Oregon.

Given all the activity in Boardman and the Port of Morrow, Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair Don Russell said he wasn't surprised by the census' figures.

Census shows continued demographic shifts

Charles Rynerson, the coordinator at the Oregon State Data Center at Portland State University, also didn't find the growth in Umatilla and Morrow counties surprising.

He attributed their growth to existing trends, mainly their status as a commercial and transportation hub in the region, in addition to its growing Latino populations.

When studying 2020 census data, age demographics stood out to Rynerson. Morrow and Umatilla counties have the highest share of residents under 18 in Oregon. But, like the rest of the state, the share of children fell from 2010 to 2020. Across the state and across demographics, birth rates are down.

"In a world where people are

getting sick, and the forests are burning and floods are destroying things, I got to believe that it has some impact on young people's decision about bringing a child into the world," he said.

Umatilla and Morrow counties also are continuing to see their Latino populations rise. More than 1 in 4 residents now is Latino in Umatilla County, while 41% of Morrow County's population now is Latino, the highest in the state.

Four out of the five top Oregon counties with the highest share of Latino residents are outside metropolitan areas, and most of the rest of the top 10 are in suburban counties rather than urban.

No county in Eastern Oregon matched the state's 10% growth rate, and Grant County lost population. But by mostly staving off population decline in 2020, the region and the rest of Oregon defied the national trend. According to the census, hundreds of rural counties nationwide lost population, including states like Alabama, Indiana and Kansas.

Hospitals

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across Region 9, an area that encompasses Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Malheur counties, according to the state.

The flood of COVID-19 patients comes as the state breaks its all-time COVID-19 hospitalization record for four consecutive days this week, topping out at 733 on Friday, Aug. 13.

Those soaring infection rates prompted Gov. Kate Brown to reinstate mask requirements in public indoor spaces this week, a measure that took effect Aug. 13. That same day, Brown announced she'll send 500 Oregon National Guard members next week to assist 20 struggling hospitals statewide.

"I cannot emphasize enough the seriousness of this crisis for all Oregonians, especially those who might need emergency or intensive care," Brown said in a video.

Stare down with delta

Over the past week, 17 people have been hospitalized with COVID-19 at Good Shepherd, a sharp uptick from the five who were hospitalized earlier this month. Every day, the hospital is using a month's worth of oxygen due to the latest surge and will "carefully monitor our usage while working closely with our (oxygen) supplier to keep up with the demand," Cozad said.

As of Thursday, Aug. 12, 40% of Good Shepherd's 30 patients had COVID-19.

CHI St. Anthony, Pendleton, is facing similar challenges. Nearly one in three patients in the hospital's emergency department have COVID-19, Emily Smith, a hospital spokesperson, said in an email.

At times, the hospital has "been unable to transfer patients completely, and other times we are having to call (more than 20) hospitals before we find an open bed," Smith said.

As hospitals across

the Northwest fill with COVID-19 patients, hospitals in Umatilla and Morrow counties are sending some patients to facilities further and further away for higher levels of care, including Bend, Boise, Reno or San Francisco.

"The strain is tremendous on hospitals in our region due to this surge," Cozad said.

All this is taking a toll on health care workers, officials say.

"This pandemic has waged on far longer than many of us thought it would," Smith said, "and at the point when we felt like it was starting to get better, it has only gotten worse."

Fiumara said public health employees are similarly exhausted and was sympathetic for what hospital workers are experiencing.

"It has got to be extremely frustrating to see people coming in for what is a preventable situation," Fiumara said. "Because they chose not to take the steps needed to avoid it. This is a preventable disease now."

If the surge continues, area hospitals could resort to suspending elective surgeries. Smith said St. Anthony is evaluating surgeries on a "day-to-day and case-by-case basis" and hopes to avoid suspending surgeries, "but we will do what is needed to ensure care for all who require it."

The dire conditions at hospitals come as the counties report some of the highest COVID-19 infection rates statewide. Umatilla County has reported more than 400 cases for three straight weeks — totals that are far higher than any of the county's previous surges, according to state data.

Morrow County this week is expected to report its highest weekly COVID-19 case count since the pandemic started, with more than 100 cases, according to Russell. The two ZIP codes encompassing Irrigon and Boardman reported the most new COVID-19 cases per capita in Oregon over the past week, The Oregonian/

OregonLive reported.

Cases rise among youth as vaccinations increase

Fiumara said young people are increasingly making up the majority of cases, and many are falling seriously ill, a national trend that bucks previous understandings of how the pandemic affects youths. Regional hospitals, he added, are reporting that more young people are falling seriously ill than ever before during the pandemic.

This week, the state reported a 35-year-old Morrow County woman with COVID-19 died in her home. In Union County, a 19-year-old woman became

Oregon's fourth resident younger than 20 to die with COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

"It is spreading differently and affecting people differently," Fiumara said of the delta variant, which is estimated to be at least twice as transmissible as the original coronavirus strain. "Every day, we get more evidence that supports that it's a more severe illness than the original variant. And it's still largely preventable."

The Umatilla County Public Health Department has not recently combed through data to determine how case rates compare among vaccinated and unvaccinated people.

Recent data from the Oregon Health Authority shows the percentage of vaccinated people contracting COVID-19 is increasing as the delta variant spreads, but the vaccines still are highly effective against preventing severe illness and death, health officials say.

In July, 50 out of Oregon's 55 COVID-19 deaths were among people who were either unvaccinated or partially vaccinated, according to the state. The state also reports more than 90% of Oregonians hospitalized within two weeks of their positive tests weren't fully vaccinated.

But amid the latest surge comes a glimmer of hope,

Fiumara said. For four straight weeks, Umatilla County reported increased COVID-19 vaccinations.

In mid-July, the county saw less than 600 people vaccinated in a single week. This week, that number jumped to nearly 1,000 people, according to county health data.

"They're seeing the writing on the wall," Fiumara said. "There are more places and more businesses putting mandates in place. ... And we're seeing (case counts) go up and they're seeing things happen and I think that's triggering that decision. It is unfortunate, in my mind, that it takes hospitalizations going up for people to make these decisions."

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