

New faces, old problems in frontier emergency response

By **TIM TRAINOR**
For the East Oregonian

If your car drives off the road, your house catches fire, or your ex is pounding too loudly on your door in Wheeler County, know this: It's likely to be a long time before help arrives.

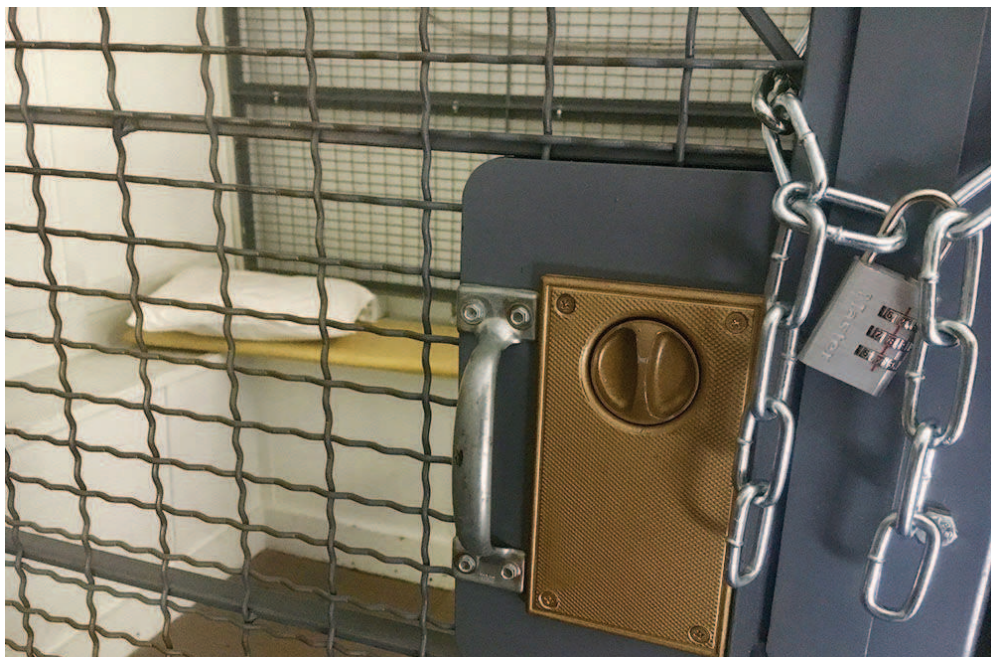
Currently, a four-person sheriff's office patrols the rural county in north-central Oregon. Yet a system of volunteer firefighters and EMTs, in place for more than a generation in the county, is in danger of collapse.

The number of volunteer firefighters has dropped by more than half since the lumber mill in Fossil closed more than 20 years ago, taking with it most of the local economy and much of the population. The regional emergency dispatch center in nearby Condon is down three positions. To cover, dispatchers have been working 12-hour shifts for nearly a year. There are no city police departments in Wheeler County and no Oregon State Police troopers are based there, though some can respond from neighboring jurisdictions many miles away.

Despite that, public safety could have been worse following a changeover of its entire county sheriff's office in 2018. When former sheriff Chris Humphreys announced in June that he wanted to resign his position, each of his deputies decided to move on as well.

"It's just kind of like when a band breaks up," Humphreys said. "When one person leaves, no one else wants to be here. And by here I mean in law enforcement ... no one wants to be here without each other."

Humphreys stayed on until December as a new band began to form. That crew is now led by Sheriff Mike Smith, who was approved by the county court after his most recent stint as deputy in neighboring Gilliam County. Undersher-



EO Media Group/Tim Trainor/East Oregonian

The Wheeler County Sheriff's Office evidence cage, located in the courthouse basement, must occasionally be emptied so defendants have a place to sit during trial breaks.

iff Mitch Elliott, who joined the force earlier in the year, has experience at both public and private law enforcement agencies throughout Oregon. Two recently hired deputies are attending the academy and will not be able to work on their own until later this summer.

Lack of resources

Though a four-person department is back in operation, structural problems remain in Wheeler County. It is Oregon's poorest, least populated and fastest shrinking county. Its 1,100 people are spread across 1,700 square miles. Sage, juniper and rattlesnakes populate the rest — a mostly unsettled desert that includes the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument as well as parts of the Ochoco and Umatilla national forests. More than half of Wheeler County is federally owned, so no taxes are levied on those tracts to help fill local coffers.

The sheriff's office is tasked with enforcing law and order in the county where those who remain are growing older and poorer — the median age is 65 and the

median income is \$33,400. As resources and populations shrink, their job becomes harder.

Former sheriff Humphreys said he once caught himself checking in for work 23 days in a row. This summer, undersheriff Elliott worked 47 straight hours as incident commander on a 46,000-acre wildfire.

"I really had no choice," Elliott said. "Downtime is not part of the job."

Elliott recently crafted the department's work schedule for the next month. If he isn't on the clock, he is on call. Every day. That means he must remain within the county and able to return a phone or radio call within minutes — all month.

"You can do that for a while," said Humphreys. "But how long?"

Headquartered in the basement of the county court building in Fossil, deputies must buy their own boots, guns and bulletproof vests, wear uniforms handed down from other departments and type up their reports on hand-me-down computers. On days off, deputies change the oil and do brake work on

their own patrol cars.

To prepare for a recent sex crimes trial, officers emptied their evidence cage to make a space for the defendant to sit during court breaks. They shuttled the man between the courthouse and the jail — located 100 miles away in John Day — every morning and evening for the length of the trial.

Decision makers

For 23 years, Rick Shaffer was public works director for the city of Fossil, served as the city's volunteer fire chief most of that time, and is now volunteer director of Wheeler County Fire and Rescue. When he decided the candidates in the November 2018 county commissioner race were not sufficiently supportive of the community's emergency responders, he decided to mount a late write-in campaign.

The campaign proved successful — Shaffer, 70, won the election by 57 votes. Throughout Wheeler County, 362 people wrote in Shaffer's name, enough to outnumber Republican primary winner Rick Paul. The competitive, high stakes commis-

sioner race is one reason why Wheeler had the highest percentage of voter turnout of any county in Oregon: In the midterm election, 84 percent of registered voters returned a ballot.

Shaffer, 70, is now tasked with trying to figure out how to keep Wheeler County's police officers on the job by making their work manageable.

Paul, a cattle rancher who lives in Mitchell, was disappointed by the loss. He says Wheeler County's high taxes and poor infrastructure show that additional funding for law enforcement would just be wasted.

"Lot of pad in that budget," he said after the loss. "I pin a lot of it on the sheriff. (Humphreys) thinks he runs the county. In some ways he does. Doesn't do a good job of it."

Shaffer doesn't pin anywhere.

"Most people don't understand what law enforcement deals with," he said.

Renee Heidi knows. Now the director of the Frontier 911 dispatch center located in Condon, she was serving as a volunteer EMT more than a decade ago when she heard a call crackle across the emergency radio. Jotting down the address, she felt immediately that the unnamed victim, who had reportedly been run over by a John Deere tractor at a farm outside Maysville, was her husband. He was a mechanic and she knew he was working on that farm that day.

Heidi was right. Due to policy, she had to respond to the scene separate from the ambulance. But respond to the scene she did, giving life-saving CPR and first aid. Her husband would be airlifted out, spend 58 days in the hospital and eventually recover.

It's not an uncommon story for rural emergency responders.

"One of the hardest parts of rural EMS is a lot of the

times we know the people we are talking to and responding to," she said. "It puts a little more emotional investment into it. Even the domestics, you can know both sides."

That personal investment can be emotionally draining. And sometimes having to stay on an emergency line with someone as they wait impatiently for crews to respond to a rural location — a life hanging in the balance — can be excruciating. Heidi said that the first responders to arrive on scene are often volunteer EMS crews. In the case of a medical emergency, geography being what it is, it may still take hours for a victim to get to a hospital after EMTs arrive. In the case of a criminal event, those volunteers arrive on scene armed only with stun guns.

Shaffer knows what those moments are like. He has responded to thousands of scenes in more than three decades on the job — some deadly, some dangerous, plenty mundane.

"There are few places in Wheeler County that don't trigger those memories of an accident or fire that happened there," he said. "Every day, I remember responding to some scene."

But Shaffer, despite taking on a new position in county government and turning 70, plans to continue responding to emergencies, no matter the toll it has taken on him.

"Age is going to keep me from doing this job before ... what do they call it ... PTSD?" he said. "I'll stop because I'll get too old, not because of that."

Undersheriff Elliott says he — and the sheriff's office — appreciate all the volunteer help they can get. But emergency professionals in frontier Oregon are finding it harder to rely on volunteers as their numbers dwindle.

"The fact is, when someone calls 911 in Wheeler County, there are only four people who are getting paid to respond," he said.

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