

# Winter weather strains local social services

By Chris Collins

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As temperatures dip and with snow almost surely on the way, Baker County services will be stretched thin in an attempt to meet the needs of those without a warm place to stay for the night.

Some help, through a variety of different funding streams, is available from Community Connection. The agency receives state and federal money that is used locally throughout North-eastern Oregon.

The agency recently received a grant totaling \$55,790 from Oregon Housing and Community Services. That money will be used to upgrade a Union County warming shelter, said Rochelle Hamilton, the Homeless Services manager for Community Connection.

Although La Grande has had a warming shelter in the past, it is not operating yet this winter because of land-use planning issues involving a new location the shelter had hoped to move to by Nov. 15. Nevertheless, La Grande is 42 miles away and it would likely not be a practical solution for those from Baker City who are seeking a warm place to stay.

The next closest warming shelter in operation in Northeastern Oregon is in Pendleton.

Hamilton works in the Community Connection administration office at La Grande. The agency serves Baker, Union and Wallowa

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Kercheski has worked in the past as a second-grade teacher at Harvest Christian Academy and taught preschool at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church for a year. She had planned to teach again this year, but because of her circumstances that didn't work out.

She currently is working part time as a sales clerk at the Sycamore Tree.

With her experience in education, her long-term goal is to secure a position with the school district, she said.

She learned about the housing help available through Community Connection after first walking into the Department of Human Services office at 3165 10th St.

There she signed up for food benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, and inquired about HUD housing and Oregon Health Plan insurance.

DHS workers next referred her to Community Connection.

Finding HUD-qualified housing in the

*"Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are a lot of things available in this community. Anyone can do it. They just have to ask for help."*

— Katelyn Kercheski, single mother of two toddlers who had to move out of her Baker City home earlier this year

community was difficult, Kercheski said. Even moving into her new home was delayed because of minor issues that kept it from meeting HUD requirements.

Finally, those problems were resolved and she and her boys once again had a home of their own.

Kercheski recognizes the good fortune that has allowed her to make it on her own — albeit with the help and prayers of her family and friends, along with individual and group grief counselors, who are helping her deal with the loss of her marriage.

She urges others to take that first step. "Don't be afraid to ask for help," she says. "There are a lot of things available in this community. Anyone can do it. They just have to ask for help."

counties.

Lori Barker, Community Connection assistant manager for Baker County, oversees the local homeless programs.

Certain criteria must be met before a person or family qualifies for housing assistance, Hamilton said during a recent visit to the Community Connection office in Baker City.

Hamilton reviewed a long list of acronyms attached to programs designed to assist those who need help putting or keeping a roof over their heads. There is money available, but there are specific requirements tied to each program and each applicant's particular situation, including the number of people in each household, and family incomes, she said. Those seeking services

must first complete an intake packet and then Community Connection staff members help determine which services best fit their needs, Hamilton said.

For those who are truly homeless, funding comes through SHAP (the State Homeless Assistance Program). Baker County is allocated funding to provide a brief respite from the elements for those in need, Hamilton said.

All funds are available on a first-come, first-served basis, she said.

The SHAP money can only be used to make a first-month rent payment or to secure up to two nights in a motel. Three nights might be provided to those with special circumstances, such as families with small children or a person with a medical

condition or someone who has plans to move into an apartment, but who might need an extra day to finalize details, Hamilton said.

"It's not meant to be housing emergency services," she added.

Community Connection works with other agencies in the community to help people consider different solutions as well, she said. That could range from moving in with family members, reaching out to New Directions Northwest, if mental health issues are a barrier to securing housing; the Northeast Oregon Compassion Center, which also provides motel vouchers; or MayDay, if domestic violence is an issue in their particular situation.

"We look to see what their plans are. We ask a lot of

personal questions and it takes a lot of paperwork," Hamilton said.

Those who are literally homeless must have an income that is at or below 80% of the area's median income, which starts at \$32,200 for one person and increases for each additional person in the household. The annual income level for a family of four to qualify is \$46,000, Hamilton said.

The Elderly Rental Assistance program (ERA) requires that one individual in the household is older than 58. That funding source provides one-time assistance for those at-risk of being homeless or who are unstably housed with an income at or below 50% of the area median income of \$20,150 for one person or \$28,750 for a family of four and adjusted for more or fewer people in the household.

Those who qualify for ERA funding may receive money for rent, including first- and last-month payments if that's what it takes to get them into a housing unit, Hamilton said. The program also will pay past-due rent, utility arrearages and utility payments and deposits.

Emergency Housing Assistance (EHA) provides a one-time payment for those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless. An EHA allotment also is available for veterans who were honorably discharged from their time in military service.

To qualify for those programs, applicants again must have an income that is at or below 80% of the area's median income. The funding covers rent, past-due rent and utility bills, security deposits, motel lodging, utility payments and water bills.

The funding is aimed at preventing homelessness and providing rapid rehousing, Hamilton said.

Emergency Solutions Grant money is federal funding provided through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The program is more restrictive than others, and requires the income of applicants to be at or below 30% of the area median income. That amounts to \$12,100 for one person and \$17,250 for a family of four.

They also must be at-risk of homelessness or fleeing domestic violence.

Home Tenant Based Assistance also is available through HUD. It is a six-month program that includes intense case management and rental assistance.

Community Connection has a HUD-certified financial counselor to help people navigate the requirements of the program, Hamilton said.

The Housing Stabilization Program partners with the Department of Human Services to help people who are eligible for Temporary Aid to Needy Families. They must have an income at or below 150% of federal poverty guidelines: \$18,735 per year for one person and adjusted for each additional person in the household; for a family of four, that would be \$38,625.

To qualify as HUD housing, fair market rent for a place with no bedrooms has been set at a maximum of \$516 per month; one bedroom, \$617; two, \$790; three, \$1,140; and four, \$1,323 per month, Hamilton said.

More information is available by visiting Community Connection in Baker City at 2810 Cedar St. or by calling 541-523-6591.

## What's New At The Library

• 2400 Resort St.

### FICTION

- "The Starless Sea," Erin Morgenstern
- "Olive, Again," Elizabeth Strout
- "Where the Light Enters," Sara Donati
- "Smoke Screen," Terri Blackstock
- "Hunter's Moon," Philip Caputo

### NONFICTION

- "The Enemy of the People," Jim Acosta
- "Finding Chika," Mitch Albom
- "Edison," Edmund Morris
- "Home Work," Julie Andrews
- "The End is Always Near," Dan Carlin

### DVDS

- "Freaks" (Drama)
- "Hustlers" (Comedy)
- "Oh, God" (Comedy, 1977)
- "Once Upon A Time In Hollywood" (Comedy)
- "Scramble The Sea Wolves" (Documentary)

### HOURS

- Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m.;
- Friday, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.;
- Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.;
- Sunday, noon-4 p.m.

## ASSISTANCE

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There is plenty of funding available at this point. Hayes urges residents to call the Senior Center to schedule an appointment to sign up or to check eligibility for the program.

### Transportation

Thanks to the state transportation improvement fund, bus fares in Baker County have dropped from \$2 per boarding to \$1 per boarding. Other special rates and routes may be found on the website at [cno.wp.iescentral.com/publictransit/baker-county-2/](http://cno.wp.iescentral.com/publictransit/baker-county-2/)

For example:

- A commuter service runs between Baker City and La Grande; call for information.
- Rides from the Haines/Keating areas on Tuesdays and Fridays; \$2 one way; call 541-523-7433.
- Baker City to Huntington to Ontario for shopping/appointments, Thursdays; \$5 round-trip; call 541-709-5777.
- Sumpter to Baker City shopping/appointments, Fridays; \$5 round-trip; call 541-894-771.
- Weekly service from

## For More Information

The Baker County Senior Center is at 2810 Cedar St. The phone number is 541-523-6591.

Halfway and Richland to Baker City

New rates are made possible by the Legislature's approval of a state tax that assesses one-tenth of 1 percent of wages of all Oregon employees to pay for transportation improvements statewide.

The white bus and the trolley that can be seen traveling through the community are the only fixed-rate transporters, Hayes said. They run from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays.

The 30-seat trolley is limited to special-occasion use only, such as for children's birthday parties, parades and other events, Hayes said.

The trolley, which is used mainly during the summer, is expensive to drive, expensive to maintain and the parts are hard to find, Hayes said.

A new bus to add to the

regular transportation fleet is expected to arrive soon, paid for through Oregon Department of Transportation grants, he said.

### In-home care

In-home care services offered through Community Connection are aimed at helping aging people to live independently in their homes for as long as possible. Services range from help with bathing, dressing, meal preparation, grocery shopping, light housekeeping and respite care.

Health services such as blood pressure testing, foot care clinics and medical equipment loans also are available.

### Nutrition

The nutrition program includes a hot meal served daily Monday through Friday in the Community Connection dining hall at 2810 Cedar St. Lunchtime is from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The suggested donation for those 60 and older is \$4.50 per person. Those younger than 60 are asked to make a donation of \$6.75.

Meals on Wheels are delivered to homes of those

who can demonstrate some reason why they can't come to the congregate meal site, Hayes said. Extra meals are delivered to the housebound on the weekends on request so they have food available on days when the center is closed.

The meal service also is provided at the New Bridge Grange on Thursdays, from noon to 12:20 p.m., and Meals on Wheels are delivered to residents of Baker County's Panhandle area on Thursdays as well.

The Harvest Share program provides fruits and vegetables, which also are delivered at Head Start, The Salvation Army and the Department of Human Services, every Thursday morning. They are offered on a first-come, first-served basis until the goods run out, which is usually by about noon on Friday.

During the growing season, Baker County residents bring produce such as apricots, plums and strawberries to

share with others as well, Hayes said.

About 1 million pounds of produce is distributed during the year, he said.

### Other activities and volunteer opportunities

The Senior Center also offers volunteer opportunities and activities every day the center is open, Hayes says.

Volunteers help to make the daily luncheon run smoothly as well as to staff the Center's "Clothes Closet," which provides used clothing at minimal prices.

Bingo is played every Tuesday and Thursday at 1 p.m. There's pinochle at 6 p.m. Friday, party bridge at 12:30 p.m. Monday and duplicate bridge at 12:30 p.m. Friday.

Information about other activities such as Tai Chi and line dancing, Tai Ji and Stretch & Flex or any other programs is available by calling the center at 541-523-6591 or dropping by 2810 Cedar St. Monday through Friday.

DEC 20-26

**ELTRYM HISTORIC THEATER**  
1809 1st Street, Baker City  
[www.eltrym.com](http://www.eltrym.com)

**STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER** PG-13  
FRI-SUN: (12:30) (3:30) 6:30, 9:30  
MON-THURS: (3:30) 6:30, 9:30  
no late show Christmas Eve

**JUMANJI: THE NEXT LEVEL** PG-13  
FRI-SUN: (1:00) (4:00) 7:00, 9:40  
MON-THURS: (4:00) 7:00, 9:40  
no late show Christmas Eve

**LITTLE WOMEN** PG  
OPENS CHRISTMAS DAY  
WED & THURS: (3:45) 6:45, 9:35

( ) Bargain Matinee  
Show Times: 541-523-2522  
Office: 541-523-5439

Season's Greetings

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www.communitybanknet.com  
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