BLOOD

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The Red Cross reported on March 17 that the coronavirus pandemic had led to the cancellation of about 2,700 blood drives in the U.S., resulting in 86,000 fewer blood donations.

The issue isn't finding donors, said Bill Williard, a collection specialist for the Red Cross' Idaho/Montana region who helped coordinate Monday's blood drive in Baker City.

"We're seeing a lot of donors coming in — we just need a place to take them," said Williard, who has been working on blood drives every weekday since the coronavirus crisis started. "Donors are concerned, naturally, about everyone's health — that's why they're here in the first place. It brings out the best in people."

Evans, who took over in early 2018 for Colleen Brooks, who had organized Baker City blood drives for almost 35 years, said the urgent need for blood seems to have spurred local residents' generosity.

Evans said 98 people signed up for Monday's blood drive — about 15 more than for the January drive, and the most Evans has ever had.

"People recognize the risk but they're willing to take it," she said.

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Cynthia Hauer donated blood Monday in Baker City.

"We're seeing a lot of donors coming in — we just need a place to take them."

— Bill Williard, Red Cross collection specialist

The Red Cross employees and volunteers employed multiple measures Monday to make what's already a sanitary process as scrupulously clean as possible — including wearing protective masks and maintaining social distancing when possible.

"We wipe down every bed, anything that's touched, after every donor," Williard said.

He pointed to the white-and-red Red Cross logo emblazoned on the cushioned beds that donors rest on.

"We're cleaning the beds so much the white is getting whiter," Williard said with a chuckle.

He said Red Cross workers, who stay in motels while traveling around the region to put on blood drives, are disinfecting their rooms before they move in.

And just as with the donors, the workers and volunteers have their temperature taken before they arrive, said Williard, who has worked for the Red Cross for almost 16 years.

The heightened hygiene isn't the only change, Evans said.

She and fellow volunteers Deanna Davis, Barbara White and Linda Taylor are working for the entire six-hour drive Monday, rather than bringing in a larger number of volunteers to work two-hour shifts.

That reduces the number of people involved, and thus the potential for infection.

The Red Cross also decided not to allow walk-in donors, limiting Monday's event to those who had signed up in advance.

Keith Hughes of Baker City, who arrived at the Nazarene Church hoping to donate blood during his lunch break from work, said he understands the precaution.

Hughes signed up to donate during the next drive, set for mid-June.

Evans also said, a trifle wistfully, that Monday's blood drive was purposely designed to not be a social event.

That's contrary to the Red Cross' typical approach, which is to encourage donors to stay for a while after giving blood to visit with other donors and to enjoy a snack.

Evans said blood drives will return to that congenial atmosphere after the coronavirus crisis.

HALFWAY

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Aspy has an active social media presence and she had seen locals offering to help with cooking, grocery runs, delivering meals to elderly residents, and other tasks. But those offers were limited to a personal Facebook group.

Halfway Helpful started with a small group of administrators Aspy invited to the page. From there, administrators added their friends, and it continued to grow.

"I honestly did not expect it to turn into what it's turned into so quickly," Aspy said. "I think it's amazing especially with the struggles we're going through."

Aspy said that although she helped spearhead the campaign, the heart and soul of Halfway Helpful comes from the people who have made it blossom.

"It's totally the community out here that's been taking the reins," she said.

Aspy isn't sure how many people the page has helped, as everything is done on volunteers' time and with their own resources.

According to the Facebook page, the group had 235 members as of Monday morning, all of whom are able to post things they can do or need help with.

Aspy, who is staying home during the crisis, said she is monitoring the page to ensure posts are family friendly.

And she's enjoying the example of community spirit.

"I'm just kind of sitting back and letting people take the reins," she said.

Local Briefing

Two Baker County students on Pacific University's dean's list

FOREST GROVE — Two Baker City students — Emily Black and Morgan Stone — were named to the dean's list at Pacific University for the fall 2019 semester. The dean's list recognizes undergraduate students in Pacific's College of Arts & Sciences who earn a grade point average of at least 3.5.

Baker School District moves special meeting to Wednesday

The Baker School District's special meeting, which will include a discussion of graduation requirements for the class of 2020, has been moved from today to Wednesday, April 1 at noon. The meeting will be available through the Zoom app. A link is available on the Baker City Herald's Facebook page.

Pre-kindergarten screening postponed

The Baker School District's annual readiness screening of pre-kindergarten children has been put on hold. The District is asking parents to fill out the forms and permission slips even though the screening has been postponed. The information can be returned to the District Office at 2090 Fourth St. Haines and Keating residents may return their forms to those schools. New screening dates will be announced later.

RANGER

Continued from Page 1A

"Even just talking to them," he said.

Many people in Sumpter are single and talking to them, giving them reassurance, is one way he found helps them through this confusing and difficult time.

The closure of state parks, along with many other businesses and institutions, has reversed the normal spring schedule for Groth.

Typically the dredge itself, the centerpiece of the park, opens for tours on May 1. But the park's trails, which are popular for snowshoeing, are open year-round.

"Historically, we'd be trying to ramp stuff up" at this time, Groth said.

Instead, he's been posting signs and trying to spread the word that the park is closed. He said some Idaho residents have traveled to Sumpter recently unaware of the statewide park closure.

"They're pretty disappointed we're closed," Groth said.

To reduce the risk of spreading the virus, Groth said he and the other ranger have been working separately rather than riding together in a vehicle.

Unfortunately, due to cold weather he hasn't been able to turn on the water to the park to aid in cleaning.

Groth, a single parent, can also empathize with parents who are dealing with the extended school closure.

"That's another part of it, keeping our families safe," he said.

Groth worked as a wildland firefighter for the BLM for 18 years. He said once he became a single parent, he wanted a job that would allow him to be home at night. He attended Oregon State University and earned a bachelor's degree in forestry.

His friends from college told him they enjoyed working for parks. Groth said he loves meeting new people and thought he would try it out.

"I'm glad I decided to do it," he said.

LANDS

Continued from Page 1A

That includes roads and trails. Dispersed camping — outside designated campgrounds — is also allowed.

Agency officials urge visitors to follow social distancing guidelines when recreating on public lands.

The recreation site closures affect the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur National Forests, as well as the BLM's Vale District.

The BLM's Oregon Trail Interpretive Center near Baker City is closed, but the 4-mile network of trails near the Center is open.

According to a press release from the Forest Service, the recreation site closures were prompted in part by executive orders from governors in Oregon, Idaho and Washington asking residents to stay home during the crisis to reduce the spread of the virus.

The reason specific recreation sites only are closed is that those are the places where larger numbers of people are likely to congregate, said Travis Mason-Bushman, a public affairs officer for the Wallowa-Whitman.

For instance, a group might gather at a trailhead — particularly one that has an outhouse — but on the trail itself there's much more room for visitors to spread out and comply with social distancing guidelines, he said.

Closing sites also means forest employees don't have to put themselves at risk by cleaning and maintaining outhouses and other buildings, Mason-Bushman said.

The closures also will reduce the likelihood of forest visitors becoming lost or injured, which would put pressure on emergency services in rural areas that don't have surplus capacity.

"We recognize the impact that these closures will have on people looking to the outdoors for a respite from these challenging times, but protecting community health and safety is our first priority," the Forest Service press release reads. "This action will significantly reduce risks to forest visitors, employees, volunteers, and contractors from coronavirus."

All reservations made for forest recreation facilities during the temporary closure will be fully refunded.

Many Forest Service campgrounds would not be open this time of year due to snow.

State, county sites

Oregon state parks, including the Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area, are closed.

Baker County has delayed the spring opening of Hewitt and Holcomb Parks, on Brownlee Reservoir about 3 miles east of Richland, until May 1. When Brownlee Reservoir rises enough, the dock will be open for boat launching.

WATER

Continued from Page 1A

Warner said the city has stopped assessing the $5 late fee for customers who fail to pay their bill within 40 days of receiving the bill.

Warner said the city also will be lenient with residents who are behind on their bills.

"I really don't want to shut anyone's water off during this crisis," he said Monday morning. "If you're having trouble, call the Water Department and they'll work with you."

The Water Department's number is 541-523-6541.

"If they make any kind of payment we're not going to shut anyone off," Warner said. "It's pretty flexible."

Warner said he decided not to temporarily cancel the shutoff policy because he doesn't want to encourage customers who are chronically late to amass an even larger balance that they might not ever be able to pay.

He said residents who potentially face having their water shut off now would have had to fail to pay their bills during February and most or all of January — before the coronavirus began spreading widely in the U.S.

Residents who have their water turned off are assessed $60 in fees.

Warner said the city has occasionally assessed the shutoff fines three or four times per year for a single customer, meaning the fees can be nearly as much as the charges for actual water use.

As of Monday morning, Warner said only one of the city's more than 4,000 water accounts is without water service.

Three other customers who were scheduled to have their water shut off last week paid their bill, Warner said.

He said that although a city ordinance calls for delinquent customers to pay their entire balance before their water is turned back on, the city is not requiring customers to pay the entire amount due to keep their water flowing.

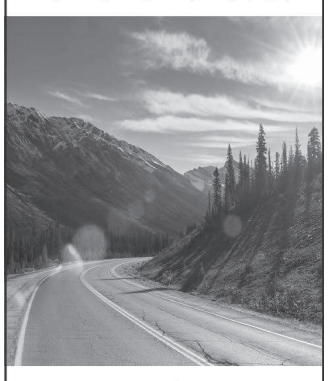
Warner said he's expecting an increase in the number of late accounts as a result of layoffs due to business closures and other effects from coronavirus restrictions.

Warner's weekly report, which is available on the city's website, www.bakercity.com, sometimes lists the number of accounts that were slated to have water turned off for failing to pay, and the number that were actually shut off.

The most recent report that included those statistics was Feb. 21. During the previous week the city had tagged 16 customers for water shut off, and actually shut off water to five customers.

So far during 2020, according to previous weekly reports, the city has identified 110 accounts for potential shut off, and the city temporarily turned off water to 25 of those customers.

Spring is here! There are still cool days, watch for slick areas!



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