

Nonprofit helps families affected by COVID

Northeast Oregon Network serves Baker, Union and Wallowa counties

By DAVIS CARBAUGH

The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — In difficult times, a community-based organization is providing some relief to families impacted by COVID-19.

Northeast Oregon Network, a nonprofit based in La Grande, provides support to families whose incomes are impacted by a quarantine or isolation by offering grocery gift cards and other services. Funded by the Oregon Health Authority and other partners, the nonprofit health collaborative aims to provide financial and non-financial support to families in need.

“We just want to help people make it through their quarantine or isolation safely because it’s a really stressful time,” Executive Director Liberty Avila said.

Local outreach

The Oregon Health Authority began funding the program in July 2020, while the Center for Human Development, La Grande, also works with the organization on a local basis. According to Avila, Northeast Oregon Network has assisted roughly 300 families with groceries and other services since the start of the pandemic. The organization’s outreach spreads across Union, Baker and Wallowa counties.

For families in need due to quarantine, the program can provide up to \$120 in grocery gift cards per family member. Northeast Oregon Network also helps families retrieve their groceries if necessary, transport family members to medical facilities, run errands as needed and other means of service.

“We’re just trying to fill those gaps that are hard to fill, especially when you’re stuck at home,” Avila said.

Families in need

There is no needs-based testing for families looking to utilize the NEON program, which aims primarily to help families that are greatly affected by a loss of income due to staying in quarantine.

The intake forms specifically state that the family needs to be in isolation due to COVID-19 or contact with someone that has COVID-19. The program seeks to help families that do not receive sick time through their job or are losing significant income because of testing positive for COVID-19.

“It’s limited to people who are in isolation or quarantine, not just generally folks that need help unfortunately,” Avila said. “But, we can help people sign up for the vaccine or help navigate resources and help them figure out how they can get rental assistance and other things.”

In order to request financial assistance in the form of grocery gift cards, families can reach out to the county’s WRAP services at 541-962-1610 or covidwrapsvc@union-



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county.org, which will connect them with Northeast Oregon Network. However, Avila said the majority of families come directly through case investigation and contact tracing.

“One of the questions they ask is if you need services to be able to stay in quarantine,” Avila said. “That’s when a referral might get made. They might, with your consent, send your information to our coordinator, Sandy, and she might reach out directly.”

COVID-19 spike

With the recent COVID-19 spike, more and more families are affected by hardships related to loss of income from staying in quarantine. Northeast Oregon Network is aiming to help families in need financially, but the scope of their assistance has been limited since the start of the pandemic.

“There were other times where we could pay bills and things

like that, but we had budget constraints to work with and we aren’t able to do that anymore,” Avila said.

The nonprofit seeks to aid families dealing with the repercussions of the pandemic, with around-the-clock responses.

“We want people to feel safe when they quarantine,” Avila said, “and we’re also trying to stop the spread by making sure families quarantine.”

ADRIAN

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Adrian taxpayers will pay out the \$52,500 plus health insurance costs owed under Purnell’s contract over the next six months as a new superintendent is sought.

Purnell has been an educator for 37 years, and an administrator for 19 of those.

Before coming to Adrian, he held a variety of roles — including superintendent, high school principal, geometry teacher and volleyball coach — during 18 years in Prairie City.

Monday night saw Purnell energetically defended by the community he has served.

“I know firsthand that Mr. Purnell is one of the best superintendents in the county, and it breaks my heart that we are in this position,” said Nickie Shira, Malheur Education Service District STEM coordinator and Adrian 2040 founder. “It’s sad that it has come to this. But beyond mask mandates, there’s a lot to running the school, to leading the staff and being an administrator. And Mr. Purnell is a man of integrity and ethical leadership.”

The subject of masking, opposed by some as government infringement on rights, came up during public comments to the board.

“I’m a senior this year at Adrian and I don’t really care what it takes,” said Elizabeth Nielson, Associated Student Body president. “Being online in school was not good. And if it means doing something I don’t want to do, because I don’t want to wear a mask, I’ll do what it takes.”

Across Oregon, school boards have been angered by Gov. Kate Brown’s mandates, including the requirement that everyone in a school building wear a mask. Two other local superintendents, Alisha McBride in Vale and Darren Johnson in Nyssa, have publicly come out against the mask order since it was announced in July, but their districts have been complying.

“We have a shared priority to reliably return students to full-time, in-person school this year,” said Colt Gill, director of the Oregon Department of Education. “Face coverings are proven to slow the spread of COVID-19. I say this knowing that face coverings aren’t the argument. Personal freedom is

the argument. But, with personal freedom comes responsibility, not only for ourselves, but for our neighbors.”

“Superintendents implementing safety protocols are NOT being political, they are trying to maintain in-person learning,” said Gill. “The idea of a superintendent losing their job due to prioritizing in-person learning makes no sense.”

The mask mandate was a key topic at the Adrian School Board meeting on Aug. 12.

Speaking during public comment, Paul Shenk said that while he enjoyed skirting rules, “Kevin likes rules.”

“What I feel the frustration is, is that we expect the administrators to advocate for the community,” said Shenk. “As superintendents, you guys need to band together to fight.”

“(Purnell) is going to protect the district by protecting its employees, and a lot of the community would say, ‘I think that the superintendent needs to protect the kids, and protect the education the school gives by protecting the kids,’” said Jake Speelmann, former Adrian School Board member, in an interview with the Enterprise. “They see those things as opposing. Before, you

could do both. Now, with the political nature of vaccines, masks, government threats and that stuff, I think you’ve got to pick a side. You’ll toe the line, or you’ll stand on your beliefs.”

Among those beliefs is a conviction that masks are at best unnecessary, and at worst, actively harmful to children.

While Adrian High School Principal Billy Wortman insisted in an interview with the Enterprise that masks are required in his building, observers reported that few students at the high school are wearing them.

One high school student interviewed said that “not many” of her peers wear masks, but that at the elementary and middle school levels there has been more compliance.

The Enterprise is not identifying students interviewed to protect them from retaliation.

Masks or face shields are currently mandated throughout Oregon in public indoor and outdoor spaces, with the first restrictions announced specifically for schools. Districts can face heavy fines for flouting the mandate, and teachers and administrators stand to lose their licenses.

Still, Purnell has been a vocal opponent of the state’s right to impose masking on Adrian. On July 31, he wrote in a letter to the community that “it is my belief that local agencies have a better understanding of the social, emotional, psychological and physical needs of their schools and communities, rather than the one-size fits all approach that is now mandated.”

He promised that during

superintendent meetings with the Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon Health Authority, he would continue to advocate for Adrian.

Throughout the pandemic, Adrian residents have consistently opposed state protocols for dealing with COVID in schools.

Last September, the Adrian School Board sued the Oregon Department of Education and

Oregon Health Authority, alleging that the state’s system for determining which schools could open for in-person instruction was both arbitrary and capricious, and that their students should be allowed to go back to school.

Kincade said that the Adrian School Board is now considering joining a class action lawsuit against the vaccine mandate for school staff and volunteers.

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