

A changing demographic

Worker Shortage



FOURTH IN A 5-PART SERIES

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WALLOWA COUNTY — It's no secret that employers across the state are struggling to find workers. Business owners collectively furrow their brow at the trickle of job applications as more and more businesses open and the share of workers seems to be vanishing into thin air.

For some, that means closing restaurants entirely — but far more often the effects on a tightening labor market mean that expansion of operations becomes difficult.

"It's pretty much across all industries," said Stacy Beckman, general manager of Wallowa County Grain Growers in Enterprise. "Managers I've talked to are having difficulty trying to get help."

He said the business he runs didn't actually lose any workers to the pandemic, but expanding his workforce has been a challenge.

"Trying to add (workers) is tough," he said. "It's even tougher in a smaller community like we are."

Cindy Ellis, who owns and operates Heavenly's Restaurant in Enterprise, switched to takeout only when the pandemic first struck, but was able to resume indoor seating as businesses were allowed to reopen. But then reliable employees became scarce.

"We had to cut our indoor seating because someone we hired didn't show," she said. Ellis said Heavenly's was open for indoor seating when interviewed on Thursday, Sept. 16.

"We got a lot of folks from Elgin," she said, and despite a small workforce, "we were swamped."

Boomers retiring at a faster rate

Eastern Oregon saw only negligible gains in population over the the past decade, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. And looming within the numbers is a certainty that has taken the back seat to pandemic woes and commentary: The boomers are retiring.

In Eastern Oregon, the working population is aging out much quicker than in previous years. The Oregon Employment Department reported in May 2021 that the working population in Eastern Oregon had grown

significantly older from 2010 to 2020. That increased share means the number of workers age 55 and over makes up 26% of the overall workforce. That's up nearly 4% from its 2010 numbers.

As well, the population of older workers has started declining since 2017, when it reached its peak, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The rate at which the baby boomer generation has been retiring is accelerating, according to Pew Research Center. From 2019 to 2020, approximately 28.6 million baby boomers — those born between 1946 and 1964 — retired; a 3.2 million uptick from 2019. On average, that number had previously been increasing by around two million retirees per year.

The impact

"One of the other factors is that boomers are retiring at an enormous rate, which is, in a way, sucking everybody up the the corporate ladder or corporate world," said Matt Scarfo, a Union County commissioner and owner of Long Branch and Benchwarmer's Pub & Grill in La Grande.

"Everyone's getting the bump up to those higher positions, if they did have them, and so it's causing a vacuum down to the X, Y, Z generation."

On the ground, restaurants and service industries reported having to hire much

younger staff than in normal years, though the restaurant industry has historically been staffed by younger workers and those looking for part-time work, and the data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Oregon Employment Department indicate there hasn't been any significant changes in the employment level for those under the age of 18.

Angelica Zurita, who with her husband, Jose Lopez, owns the La Laguna Family Mexican Restaurants in Enterprise and Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, said they employ about 15 people at the three establishments.

During the summer tourist season, they were fortunate to find college students who were eager to work. But now, as the students return to campus, finding reliable help is a problem.

"They really don't want a job," Zurita said of some of the locals who have applied. "They show up drunk, call in sick, don't show up at all or they show up late."

Still, as the tourist season ends, she's optimistic the restaurants and saloon will manage.

"It's slowing down to where I think we've got it covered," she said.

The trades, too, are having a tough time finding workers. Jared Hillock, manager and co-owner of Hillock



Bill Bradshaw/EO Media Group

A customer enjoys the outside seating Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021, at La Laguna Family Mexican Restaurant in Enterprise. The restaurant, along with a similar one in Joseph and the Rusty Spur Saloon in Joseph, got by through the summer largely with college students as employees.

Electric, said the biggest problem is a lack of qualified electricians around.

"There are just not enough people in the trades right now," he said. "I think it's important we get kids in trades and not preach so much college."

He said a starting electrician right out of high school — after a four-year apprenticeship — can make \$32 an hour, with benefits.

"We're trying to push more kids to think about trades," he said. "You can make a good family wage right out of high school."

He does have an opening for a counter person, which he's not gotten many adequate applications for.

"We get a lot of random resumes dropped off, which guess is people trying satisfy

job-search requirements," Hillock said.

Renaissance Design, Fabrication & Powder Coating opened in May in Joseph. The business has numerous well-paying positions that are not filled, owner Rick LaFave said.

"I'm still trying to hire three or four more welders," LaFave said. "People don't want to work, I guess. ... I've talked to several people who've put feelers out, but I'm not getting people who want to go to work."

Though he doesn't have concrete evidence, he has his opinion on the cause.

"My opinion is because the (unemployment) money hasn't run out," he said.

"Hopefully, we'll get people wanting to go back to work once that runs out."

ROBBERY

Continued from A1

On the morning of Sept. 17, police responded to a report of a robbery and burglary at 1305 Seventh St. The homeowner told police that upon returning home, a person wearing a mask was

inside, and pointed a gun at the homeowner before fleeing.

Police determined that the gun was stolen from the home.

Baker City Police detectives and officers, including members of the Baker County Narcotics Enforcement Team, investigated and tied the

Sept. 17 robbery with the Sept. 15 burglary, according to the press release.

Police obtained a search warrant for a travel trailer parked at 2260 Wabash St. in south Baker City, where police believed Griffin was living. Police executed the search warrant the evening of Sept. 17 and found several items

that had been stolen from the Clark Street home, and the gun stolen from the Seventh Street home.

Police also found other items that they suspect were stolen elsewhere, possibly from local storage units over the past year. Police also found methamphetamine and "items indicative of drug

trafficking," according to the press release.

Police arrested Griffin the evening of Sept. 17. He was taken to the Baker County Jail on a parole violation charge. He had been released from the jail recently after spending three days there on a separate parole violation charge.

On Thursday, Sept. 23, a Baker County grand jury indicted Griffin on the robbery, burglary, menacing and felon in possession of a firearm charges.

The grand jury did not consider possible drug trafficking charges, but that could happen in the future, according to the press release.

COVID

Continued from A1

Of the other 23 residents, the youngest are two men, both age 59. One died in February 2021, the other in July 2021.

"I'm so sorry for her family and friends' loss," Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said in a press release announcing Cleo's death. "Please keep her family and friends in our thoughts and prayers."

Cleo's death was the fourth reported this week among Baker County residents, and the fifth during September. That's the most in any week during the pandemic.

Statewide during the pandemic, 27 people age 29 or younger have died after testing positive, according to OHA. That's 0.7% of the 3,661 deaths through Thursday, Sept. 25. Almost 71% of those who have died were 70 or older.

September has set a record for the most cases in Baker County, with 379 through Sept. 23. The previous record was 300 cases during August 2021.

'She loved children'

Cleo, who was born in Kansas City, Kansas, lived for about a decade in Ontario, graduating from Ontario High School, before moving to Huntington, where her grandmother lives, about two years ago, Summer said.

Cleo was like a second mother to her three younger brothers and two younger sisters, Summer said.

Cleo contracted COVID-19 at the Payette, Idaho, video care center where she



Summer Carr/Contributed Photo

Cleo Shepherd, left, on graduation day at Ontario High School with her younger brother, Gavin.

was the head teacher for toddlers, Summer said.

"She was a natural born mother," Summer said.

It was an experience with another child — Alanna, the daughter of one of Summer's friends — that "changed the course of what she wanted to do with her life," Summer said.

Alanna had cancer at age 4, and she died at age 6.

That prompted Cleo to pursue a career as a pediatric oncology nurse, Summer said.

Cleo, who struggled with obesity for much of her life, was planning to have gastric bypass surgery, and then to enroll in nursing school, Summer said.

"She had dreams," Summer said of her daughter. "We just never got that far."

Summer said Cleo "suffered a great deal" as a child due to her weight, dealing with bullying in middle school and high school.

"She didn't have the typical teenage existence," Summer said.

Cleo's favorite diversion

was listening to — and singing along with — the pop singer Pink.

"She had the voice of an angel," Summer said of her daughter. "She always wanted to be famous, to be a singer. I regret that she never got to meet Pink, or to see her in concert."

But after a difficult childhood, during which she was also the victim of sexual abuse, Cleo had begun to "blossom" in the several months before her death, Summer said.

"She had just started to come out of her teenage shell," Summer said. "The last six months of her life were probably the best six months she had."

Summer said she was concerned when she learned that her daughter had tested positive for COVID-19 because she knows that people who are obese have a greater chance of having a severe illness.

Summer said Cleo was not vaccinated "due to personal and closely held religious convictions."

After she tested positive, Cleo quarantined in a travel trailer parked at her grandmother's property in Huntington, Summer said.

After about five or six days, during which Cleo complained about how much her chest hurt, she called Summer one day saying she was struggling to breathe.

A Baker City Fire Department ambulance took Cleo to Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Ontario.

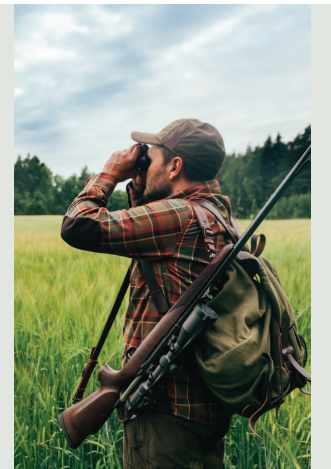
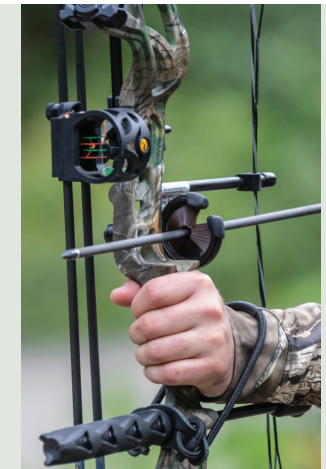
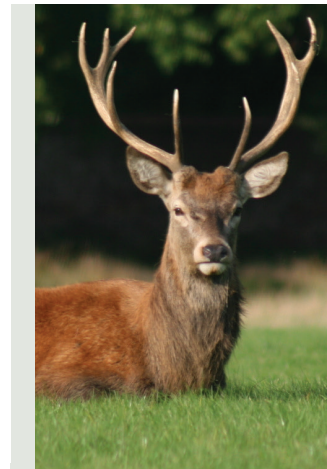
Summer said she was not pleased with the care Cleo received at the hospital during the four or five days she was there.

But the experience was quite different at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Boise, Summer said. There, nurses and other staff treated Cleo, braided her hair and treated her "as if she was their own child," Summer said.

Cleo's condition, however, continued to worsen.

The disease affected her kidneys, and she had to undergo constant dialysis.

Although Cleo wasn't able to communicate, Summer said she was able to play Pink's music through the video chat.



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