Rescue

Continued from A1

Low-head dams are a particular hazard for people floating the river because they have a "recirculating hydraulic" or "washing machine" effect. The smooth water heads straight down the sloping dam to the bottom of the river, before it cycles back onto itself.

"If someone gets stuck in there, it's not just going to buck them out," said Boyd, a 22-year veteran of Bend Fire & Rescue.

The Mirror Pond dam on Newport Avenue has a buoy line that acts as a slight physical barrier. At the Pioneer Park low-head dam, which is owned by the Tumalo Irrigation District, the only upstream warning is single floating orange buoy. There's nothing to stop a person from floating right over the dam.

Rescuers are often called on to extract dead bodies from the river. The only real difference in technique between a live rescue and a body recovery is urgency, Boyd said.

The training was not related to the death of surfer Ben Murphy, 17, at the Bend Whitewater Park. On April 30, Murphy's foot became stuck in a narrow gap between gates that form the surf wave at the park

The river is now so crowded on sunny summer days, it can force users to other parts of the river, places where they aren't as aware of the risks.

The next river access point upstream from the Old Mill District is Meadow Camp, where the water is relatively calm. But between those two points is a lot of rowdy water. Bend Fire & Rescue has conducted a number of rescues of people who tried to float from Meadow Camp into Bend, Boyd said.

Boyd said more people seem to be jumping off bridges into the river, which exposes them to unexpected hazards below the surface. Within Bend, the river served as log ponds, or decks, for decades for two of the world's largest pine lumber mills, and evidence of this abounds on the river bottom. The river level also fluctuates, which means an area safe for diving one week, could be dangerous the next.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Personnel from several agencies hone their water-rescue skills Tuesday in a joint training session at the low-head dam near Pioneer Park on the Deschutes River in Bend.

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Veterans

Continued from A1

According to Newell, most veterans don't realize that government benefits can have a positive impact on them and their families. Vietnam veterans often believe they don't need assistance or someone else would be better off utilizing their benefits, Newell said.

"If a veteran walks away from their benefits and doesn't use them, then they just don't get used," Newell said.

In Deschutes County, the largest number of veterans served in either Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan. State and county officials see significant rates of PTSD for veterans from each of those conflicts.

The state veterans affairs office also has seen an increase in Agent Orange exposure-related disability claims from Vietnam vets.

Newell said many veterans, especially Vietnam veterans, experience both visible and invisible health-related issues that they don't always realize are related to their service, which is why learning about unused benefits is the focus of this volunteer program.

Keith Macnamara, manager of Deschutes County Veterans' Services, said outreach is key.

"Anything is going to be very, very helpful," he said of efforts to expand volunteer work in rural counties. "There is a lot of noninformation out there."

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many volunteer initiatives came to a halt. Newell switched from in-person visits to nursing homes, long-term care centers and adult foster homes to delivering informational brochures to these locations, as well as food banks. The brochures can only do so much, though.

"The veterans that really need this probably aren't going to respond with just a brochure," Newell said.

Emil Graziani, 73, of Salem is one of the volunteers for the state's veterans services. He has worked with the program since 2018 and is a Vietnam veteran. He described returning from combat and having no interaction with the state veterans affairs office for 30 years until he met a doctor who took the time to care for and help him find a proper prosthetic.

« A group of veterans prepares a rifle salute during a Memorial Day Service at Deschutes Memorial Gardens in Bend on May 31, 2021.

Dean Guernsey/Bulletin file

Ever since, he has dedicated his time to assisting his fellow veterans by offering resources directing them to adequate care and compensation.

"It's a delight telling people where they can help save money and get benefits that they've earned," Graziani said.

Central Oregon Veterans Outreach is already working with veterans in rural areas that Newell and his department are aiming to help. "The majority of veterans are not aware that they have any benefits at all," said J.W. Terry, the executive director of the organization.

While the expansion of volunteer opportunities to Deschutes County is a positive one, it's education-based approach doesn't address the other inequalities that exist when it comes to the availability and eligibility for veterans' benefits, said Erik Nelson, the veterans' services coordinator for the outreach organization. "Veterans come in a lot of shapes and sizes," he said.

The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs volunteer training is scheduled to take place from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. July 21 at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4108 in Redmond. For more volunteer opportunities or information, visit the websites for Deschutes County Veterans' Services and Central Oregon Veterans Outreach.

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Sluka

Continued from A1

The hospital named Dr. Steve Gordon, a former member of the St. Charles board of directors, as interim CEO. A primary care physician, Gordon has worked as a health care management consultant with Point B. Inc. since 2016. Prior to that he served in executive leadership roles for PeaceHealth in Vancouver, Washington, and Providence Health and Services in Portland.

St. Charles operates four hospitals, one each in Bend, Redmond, Madras and Prineville.

During Sluka's tenure, he's grappled with labor issues, including a nursing shortage, a medical technicians strike in 2021 and just last month, the announcement by more than 300 providers that they were forming a labor union to ensure a bigger say in decision-making affecting patient care.

"We thank Joe Sluka for his service and wish him well in the next chapter of his life," said Joel Hernandez, a registered nurse at St. Charles and Oregon Nurses Association board member. "He led St. Charles during an important period of expansion and change and helped build upon our reputation as an outstanding community hospital and health system."

The union, which represents about 1,200 nurses at St. Charles Bend, Redmond and Prineville, urged the board to find a replacement as quickly as possible and to include the input from local nurses and allied health care workers.

Oliver Tatom, who works at St. Charles Bend and is a candidate for Deschutes County Commission, said he felt Sluka listened to workers.

Dean Guernsey/Bulletin file

Emergency personnel care for patients at St. Charles Bend in 2021.

Sluka

"I am so proud of this organization and the more than 4,500 employees who put their hearts into caring for our community every single day. This is a very difficult decision. I feel it is time for me to step aside, recharge and provide the opportunity for new operational leaders to guide St. Charles forward."

— Joe Sluka, St. Charles Health System CEO

"I felt listened to," Tatom said. "I saw action being taken that they recognized the issues and were interested in helping to resolve them. I felt like he cared about the frontline caregivers and wanted to make things better for us."

Central Oregon Providers Network, the labor union organized to represent the 300 medical providers, said it will work with whomever is appointed to fill Sluka's position.

The National Labor Relations Board was supposed to hold a hearing on Friday, but it was delayed indefinitely. The hospital had asked the labor board to dismiss the union's petition for a secret ballot election.

Former board member and state Rep. Knute Buehler said that Sluka's retirement represents another challenge for the hospital system.

"This is a very perilous time for St. Charles Health System with ongoing labor strife, poor physician relations, a deteriorating financial condition and now key leadership changes," Buehler said. "A turnaround is needed which will require a transformational leader or being acquired by an outside health system due to the complexity of the problems.

"It's crucial for us all that the board of directors make a series of very astute decisions to navigate the storm."

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