

# Sheriff's office cleans out homeless camp along river

**By JADE McDOWELL**  
Staff Writer

Residents of an unofficial homeless camp on Old River Road were trespassed Friday morning from the property by the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office.

As county workers clad in neon orange vests pulled old cushions and broken buckets out of the bushes and threw them into an overflowing dumpster, some of the camp's residents stood on the side of the road with their belongings pushed into a pile.

"We don't know where to go," Tammy Page said.

She and her boyfriend Phillip Martinez called that spot by the Umatilla River home for about five months, she estimated, after being evicted from their previous camping spot along the river behind Umatilla High School.

About two weeks ago, she said, some people who said they worked

for the state came and told them they needed to move to higher ground because the river was going to flood. That put them closer to the road, and their increased visibility generated complaints.

Page said people from the community had stopped by in recent weeks with food and blankets. But many people want the homeless "out of sight and out of mind."

"They don't know how to face it," she said.

Page said sheriff's deputies came Wednesday to tell everyone they had to leave the area by Friday at 11 a.m.

She said no matter how the camp's residents ended up homeless, it was still humiliating to have to walk out Friday morning with everything she owned on display. She also said it was embarrassing to hear people refer to her as one of the "river people" and shoo her out

of local businesses.

She acknowledged that the commercial-sized dumpster brought in by the county was already overflowing with garbage by 11:30, but said some of the items that had been cleaned out, such as rusty appliances, were clearly dumped there by other people — people with homes.

A statement from the Umatilla County Sheriff's office, released Friday afternoon, said people illegally camped by the river had been encouraged numerous times to leave the property voluntarily and had been given ample warning of Friday's cleanup.

The county has been receiving complaints about unsanitary conditions created by the camp, and several citizens said they no longer feel safe recreating on the river.

"Clearly, the public wants the encampment removed," the statement said.

The statement went on to note that studies have shown a "strong relationship between homelessness and criminality" that manifested in higher crime rates in the surrounding areas.

"Case in point: All of the persons our deputies contacted yesterday at the Umatilla encampment had criminal histories, some extensive ... additionally, the environment can be polluted and negatively impacted by litter, infectious waste and other hazardous materials, human waste and the potential for fires."

The statement said the number of people at the camp was growing, and two other camps have been reported in the county.

For those reasons, Umatilla County decided to trespass people from the riverbank and bring in a work crew to clean out what was left behind.

Kimberlee Castellanos was gathering up her belongings Friday morning but said she did not know where she was going to take them or even how she was going to transport them. She said the way the group was being thrown out was "inhumane."

"This is crazy," she said, gesturing around to the four sheriff's deputies and other officials supervising the cleanup process. "This is like a police raid for a drug dealer or a murderer."

She described herself as "newly homeless" and said while there were groups that delivered food and other donations, it was shocking how rude others in the community had treated them.

"People act like we're aliens, or a disease," she said.

After banning camping in city limits, pushing the homeless camps outside of town, the Umatilla City

Council on Tuesday discussed the idea of working with the county to establish a designated transient camping spot with dumpsters, toilets and fire pits to help forestall some of the sanitation issues.

Mayor David Trott said he wanted to sit down with county and state agencies to come up with a plan, since the tactic of cleaning out camps had only served to shuffle the problem around.

"We can't just draw a line in the sand again and kick them down the road," he said.

Page said if the county and city did come up with a designated camping area for homeless residents that included toilets, she and Martinez would be more than happy to stay there. They just need a place to sleep every night, she said, where they wouldn't be considered a nuisance.

"I'm sorry I'm in this position," she said.



Tammy Page and Phillip Martinez stand with their belongings on the side of Old River Road after the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office evicted them from a section of riverbank where they had been living.



County Corrections workers throw items in a dumpster along Old River Road while a group of homeless people who had been camping there load their belongings into a pickup truck belonging to a relative of one of the campers.



A newly erected sign along Old River Road prohibits camping in an area that has served as a homeless camp for several months.

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