



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY
Volunteer Tysn Southwick, of Hermiston, separates cans and bottles into plastic bags Tuesday morning at Agape House.

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fill it up and then return it to the BottleDrop Redemption Center, 740 W. Hermiston Ave., Hermiston. It's open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. The bags have an identification tag that earmarks

proceeds to be donated to Agape House.

A nonprofit organization, Agape House serves those in need in western Umatilla County and Morrow County. It's located at 500 Harper Road, Hermiston. For more information or to donate to its programs, call 541-567-8774.

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down the room, looking around furtively as if worried someone might recognize them.

One man declared he hadn't needed help in "a very long time." Another man and woman searched through a shopping cart full of household goods for a blanket to give the little boy they brought with them.

Danielle Martin-Kestler said this was only her third time to the Agape House in all the time she has lived in the area.

"We're just a little short on food this month," she said after a moment's hesitation.

She said the Agape House does a great service for all kinds of community members, from those who need the help on a regular basis to those who just had a really bad month financially.

"For people who are homeless, or just need some extra help feeding their kids, this is the place to go," she said.

At the reception desk, Munoz said the best part of her job was seeing the emotions on peoples' faces at the moment when they receive some much-needed help.

"When you see the people that need it, especially the kids, they're so happy to see the food," she said.

She said the regular clients begin to open up

about their problems after a while, when they start to feel "like family."

The Agape House (officially Eastern Oregon Mission Inc.) opened its doors in Hermiston on Aug. 5, 1986 when founder Kathleen Knudson used a small rented house to distribute food and clothing to the homeless and indigent.

Later the quickly-growing nonprofit purchased a building on South 11th Street, then moved to its current location on Harper Road in 2005. Its original function as a food and clothing bank has greatly expanded to provide classes, showers, household goods, firewood, gas money and transitional shelter for families at Martha's House.

Current director Dave Hughes took over operations in 2002.

He said in the years since, he has been extremely impressed with the help the organization has received.

About 98 percent of the nonprofit's budget comes from donations, and all of the vehicles used in its operations have been donated too. Hughes said people are constantly dropping off donations of clothing, furniture and other items. Meanwhile local farms, processing plants and grocery stores help stock the warehouse with food that is then distributed to community members in need.

"The list goes on," Hughes said. "Almost anyone involved in food in this community has been

involved in some way."

He said businesses without food to donate are quick to donate in-kind services as well — the Agape House raised more than \$3,000 during this year's Pendleton Round-Up by charging for parking on a lot owned by Tom Denchel Ford Country.

Some people use the Agape House's services just once before getting back on their feet. Others are seniors on a fixed income who rely on the emergency food boxes to get through the end of every month.

"That's part of life," Hughes said.

In addition to the food boxes, which provide enough food for about four days, the Agape House also distributes food to children in the community through the Backpack Program. Hughes said the program, which sends bags of food home with 100 to 150 students each weekend, started when a principal told him she had students who would wrap up their school lunch on Friday and take it home because they knew they wouldn't be fed at home during the weekend.

"It's sad to think that in this community that grows so much food, we have kids going hungry," he said.

In 2012, Eastern Oregon Mission opened Martha's House, a "family transitional shelter" that provides a few months' worth of housing to families with children that would

otherwise find themselves homeless. At Martha's House they learn skills like cooking and writing a cover letter, and are required to look for work and spend time volunteering if they don't have a job.

The shelter can house up to 10 families at a time. The original time limit for living at Martha's House was four months, but Hughes said that deadline has been extended for some families that are doing their part to get into other housing but have been tripped up by a shortage of available rentals in Hermiston.

"If somebody has had some missteps in the past, it's hard," he said. "Housing is so tight in this community that the landlords are full all the time."

Maria Trevino, who volunteers her time filling food boxes for five hours each week, said the volunteers and employees enjoy spending time together and enjoy the feeling of serving others.

She said the nonprofit could always use more volunteers like herself, and donations of good-quality food.

"I wish we had more eggs," she said. "You know, with eggs, you can do a lot of things."

The Agape House is open Tuesday through Thursday each week from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. On Sunday, from 2-5 p.m., the public is invited to a 30th anniversary open house with tours and refreshments.



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