

THE BRINK OF HOMELESSNESS

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

Letitia Kidder had planned to retire with her husband, sell their home and move out to the country. But when he died five years ago, Kidder found herself saddled with expenses she couldn't afford — including her home.

The Hermiston house where she has lived for a decade was foreclosed on in June, giving Kidder six months to either come up with the funds or vacate.

"I have to be out at midnight on Christmas," she said.

While the 2017 count by the state of Oregon found 55 homeless people in Umatilla County, many more like Kidder are on the brink of homelessness.

Kidder is a veteran, as was her husband. He died of a heart attack in December 2012, in the middle of fighting for VA benefits.

"He was in pain from an ankle injury he received while he was in the service," she said.

With three sons in their teens when her husband, Charles, died, Kidder said her first priority was getting her boys through school.

But as she waited to file for widow's benefits, she said she was informed that the last stage of the application could take between two and 10 years to process.

When her husband died, Kidder was unemployed. She found a job shortly after, but was struggling to pay bills. Eventually, she was hired at O'Reilly's Auto Parts, where she is still working.

"I have a good job," she said, but it wasn't enough to keep up with mortgage payments.

Kidder said she has a place to go temporarily, and she is trying to save up enough money to buy a fifth-wheel trailer. Finding another place to live is more challenging because she owns dogs, goats and a horse.



STAFF PHOTOS BY E.J. HARRIS

Marine Corps veteran Letitia Kidder may lose her Hermiston home of ten years to foreclosure by the end of the month.

"My animals are my saving grace," she said. "And yeah, to move out of my house, I first have to find a place that will take two big dogs."

She has found a farm in Power City to keep the horse and goats.

She has a trailer in mind, one that belongs to the nephew of her friend. The trailer costs around \$8,000, which Kidder said will take her a while to save up.

"I have a paycheck today, and I've got to go buy animal food," she said. "Then in two weeks I get another paycheck, and that's my plane ticket to go see my son graduate from boot camp."

Need help

Unforeseen circumstances have displaced other locals, too, many of whom take to the Walmart parking



Letitia Kidder stands in the living room of her home with her dog, Rock, a nine-year-old boxer, on Thursday in Hermiston.

lot in Hermiston to ask for help.

On a freezing Monday afternoon, an elderly woman sat in a wheelchair and a young man stood a few feet away holding a sign.

Christopher Stade, formerly of Kennewick, said someone set fire to his house in September, while he and his girlfriend were still inside.

They escaped but lost most of their belongings. Since then, they have been driving around the region, trying to collect enough money to keep the car running at night while saving for a temporary place to live.

"We don't have family that can help us, so we've been traveling

Homeless students face extra barriers to success

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

A typical student has many concerns: getting good grades, making friends and participating in extracurricular activities are just a few.

But for many students, they can come second to a more basic need: finding a place to live.

The state recently released numbers for homeless students in Oregon. The state reached an all-time high this year, with 3.9 percent of public school students qualifying as homeless.

Hermiston's numbers were below the state average, with 1.1 percent of students qualifying as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act, the federal guidelines for student homelessness. Pendleton also fell below the state average, with 2.9 percent of students qualifying.

Lisa Depew, Hermiston School District's homeless liaison, said 25

students in the district qualified as homeless this year.

She said at the beginning of the year, secretaries are usually able to assess whether a student is in an unstable living situation and can then refer them to the counselor to further determine their needs.

The district then works with state and local agencies to provide certain services for students, such as free lunches, transportation services, clothing and school supplies. Even if a student doesn't qualify under the federal definition of "homelessness," in a small community they can often still receive those services.

"Maybe it's because we're rural and small, but we wrap around a kid," she said.

She added that they try to provide some other services at the secondary school level as well, such as waivers for sports participation fees or testing fees.

But she said there are certain

things on which the district can't spend money designated for homeless students, including shelter.

"We don't go there," she said. "Unfortunately, we don't have a shelter, and one area that is sorely needed is affordable housing. Our care coordinator will attempt to assist with that."

InterMountain Education Service District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said the number of homeless students is increasing because institutions are getting better at identifying them, rather than a rise in overall youth homelessness.

Mulvihill said the IMESD combines its money with Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. and Umatilla County to provide its Wellness Hubs programs. In addition to providing services like oral health, nursing and mental health to students in need, Mulvihill said one of the most important parts of the programs is the ability of care coordinators to go visit homes.

While phone calls used to suffice, Mulvihill said having a staff member visit a student's living situation gives educators a better way of assessing homelessness and what the student needs.

Stanfield Secondary School counselor Kirsten Wright said that while the district keeps information about homeless students confidential, teachers often have some awareness that a student is in need, and will try to help make things easier.

"Grades are a huge concern," said Wright, who attended a training this week about homeless students. "I think our teachers, even if we don't tell them (a student is homeless), are really good at providing accommodations."

But she added that it is a burden for students in unstable living situations to prioritize classes.

"Sometimes they have younger siblings and need to be caretakers," she said. "It takes away from

wherever we can find help," he said. "We're about \$100 short of getting an RV."

Stade said he had a job at a moving company in Kennewick before the fire, but he decided to leave everything behind to get away from the relatives of the person who burned their house down.

Standing nearby, a 67-year-old woman who asked to be identified only as "Nana" sat in a wheelchair. "I feel ashamed," she said through tears as late afternoon temperatures dipped into the low 30s.

Nana, a longtime Hermiston resident, has been homeless for several months, but she said it wasn't always her situation.

In the fall of 2016, when she was living in low-income housing, Nana fell ill and had to be admitted to Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland.

According to her friend Susan Dickens, while she was in the hospital her landlords decided they couldn't hold her space and put her belongings in storage, leaving her without a home.

Nana said she was working with the ConneXions program at Good Shepherd, but they tried to place her in a rest home in another city.

"They said it was the only option I had because I can't walk," she said. "Instead of just sending me around here, they were going to send me to Portland or Spokane where I wouldn't know anybody."

She said ConneXions paid for one week's stay in a motel, but since then she'd been funding it with her own savings — which she has now exhausted — and has now been standing in front of Walmart several days a week to earn enough money to finance the next week's stay.

She said she usually gets between \$30 and \$60 per day when she stands outside but still feels embarrassed by the stigma of being homeless.

getting to be a student and getting to participate in extracurricular activities."

Wright recalled a student who graduated last year who was sharing space with another family because her own living situation was unstable.

"She was still financially on her own for a lot of it," Wright said.

She added that the student gave birth right before her senior year, and still had a few classes to complete.

"One accommodation we gave was we shortened the day," Wright said. "It was to ease the burden of not only homelessness, but needing to work and provide for the baby."

Wright said the student completed her education successfully, the first in her family to have a high school diploma.

"She had to overcome a lot of barriers to achieve that, so that was huge," she said.

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