



EO FILE PHOTO

CASA volunteers take the oath of office from Umatilla County District Court Judge Lynn Hampton in August at the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton.

## Many ways to help foster kids

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN  
STAFF WRITER

Whether opening up your home or being their cheerleader, there are many ways to help foster children.

Children in foster care have varying needs, from a temporary place to stay to therapy for emotional and behavioral issues.

Some people help foster kids as Court-Appointed Special Advocates, or CASAs. These volunteers will spend time with and get to know a foster child, serving as a friend and stabilizing force for them. CASAs will speak on the child's behalf at court hearings, based on the time they've spent with them.

"By visiting with the kids, it gives us the ability to advocate for what's in their best interest," said Judi Allison, a recently sworn-in advocate. "Most likely they'll say, 'I want to be with mom or dad.' That may not be in their best interest. But we have that time to be able to invest with them."

In Umatilla and Morrow counties last year, there were 83 foster youth paired with 42 special advocates.

Once a child enters foster care, they will be assigned an advocate who is usually with them all the way until they find a permanent home.

"Even if a kid moves from home to home, their CASA is ideally consistent," said Jesus Rome,

executive director of Umatilla and Morrow County CASA.

The advocate meets with the child at least once a month, whether at their home, school, or at the child's extracurricular activities. They also communicate with the other people in the child's life — foster parents, caseworkers, teachers.

"It removes that sense that they're a number," said Maureen McGrath, director of Umatilla Morrow Head Start, CASA's parent organization.

Steve Frazier, an advocate in Hermiston, noted that often they are the only consistent person to spend time with a child through the life of their case.

"There's a lot of pieces to the puzzle," he said. "We have the opportunity to make sure things are going OK."

Advocates can choose if there's a certain age group they like to work with. Frazier said he tends to work with teen boys, while Allison is currently working with several elementary school children.

CASAs can't transport children, but can meet them at their foster homes, school, or at sporting events or activities.

While many CASAs are over 55, Rome said anyone can do it, whether a young, single person or a retiree. CASA is offering a training starting April 2.

### Deeper needs

The Department of Human Services contracts with various behavioral rehabilitation services for some of the higher-needs children. One program is Therapeutic Foster Care, run through the coordinated-care organization Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, Inc. Children will be referred to that program if they meet the DHS definition of having a "debilitating psychosocial or emotional disorder."

Adam Rodakowski, director of the program for GOBHI, said the TFC program faces many of the same challenges as DHS, including recruiting parents willing to take on the responsibility of a high-needs child. Throughout their service area, which includes Eastern Oregon, the Columbia-Pacific region and parts of the Willamette Valley, Rodakowski said there are about 25 children in the program, and 23 therapeutic foster care families.

He said they've found the most success recruiting through current foster parents.

Once a child is in the program, Rodakowski said they typically stay anywhere from six to 18 months, but there is no maximum length of time. Children in the program usually have some sort of treatment plan, which par-

ents help facilitate.

The goal, he said, is to transition the child out of the program.

"That doesn't necessarily mean into a different foster home," he said. "It may mean parents choose to adopt the child."

He said one component of training foster parents receive is in collaborative problem solving, an intervention strategy which is taught by GOBHI employee Kate O'Kelley.

The method is used in foster care as well other settings, such as school and juvenile justice.

"The primary philosophy is that people will do well if they can, and that if people are struggling, it's because there's some situation that's hard for them," O'Kelley said. "They don't have the [cognitive] skills in that moment."

O'Kelley said collaborative problem solving helps children develop those skills by shifting away from blaming them for their behavior, and instead trying to help them understand why something may trigger them. They work with children on behaviors ranging from aggressive outbursts to understanding boundaries to impulse control.

"We give them simple prompts — OK, you're mad. What made you mad?" O'Kelley said. "Building new cognitive skills — it does take time."



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Rep. Greg Walden, right, listens to swing shift team leader Richard Lewellen talk about the veneer production line at the Greenwood Resources tree farm Friday, Jan. 22, 2016, near Boardman.

## Pundits see Walden as safe bet for re-election

By PHIL WRIGHT  
STAFF WRITER

Most national pundits see Republican Greg Walden as a lock to win an 11th term representing Oregon's 2nd District in the U.S. House.

Political analysts Charlie Cook, Larry J. Sabato and Nat Gonzales all have Walden rated as "safe" for reelection. Yet the grip he and the GOP have on the district shows signs of slipping.

The district is larger than 29 states and primarily conservative. But Oregon political analyst Bill Lurch said that has not curtailed energized Democrats this year, with seven vying in the primary for their party's nomination to challenge Walden.

"I think that reflects the level of unhappiness among active voters with the Trump administration," Lurch said. "And we're seeing that all over the country."

The U.S. has about 7,400 state legislative seats, and many of those state level offices are effectively held by one party, he said, predominately Republican or Democrat.

"But we're seeing Democrats filing for lots and lots of seats, which (had been) effectively out of reach for them," he said.

Republicans and political insiders considered the 18th congressional district in Pennsylvania out of reach for Democrats. The Cook Political Report even rated it the same as Oregon's 2nd — solidly Republican. Yet Democrat Conor Lamb then squeaked out a win in the March 13 special election against Republican Rick Saccone in a race where there was no incumbent.

The Pennsylvania 18th consists largely of southern suburbs of Pittsburgh, but there are rural swaths on its eastern side. Voters in the rural parts shifted Democrat, but Lurch said that shift away from Republicans in the suburban areas was "massive."

Using the 18th as a model for what could take place in the Oregon 2nd, Lurch said Walden could run into trouble in parts of Bend and Medford. And Hood River, Walden's home county, is firmly blue. The latest voter registration statistics from the Oregon Secretary of State show Dems have almost twice the votes there as Republicans.

Walden is less likely to run into trouble around Klamath Falls in the south or Pendleton to the north. But a "slow transformation" is coming over the district, Lurch said. The high-tech companies setting up shop along the Columbia River bring employees that tend to be Democrats. Local governments, including Umatilla and Morrow counties, want those workers to move into the Oregon, buy homes and get on the tax rolls.

Hood River County, then, could be on the leading edge of change or just an outlier as other counties in the Gorge remain

Republican strongholds.

Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty said he also sees political change in the district and thinks a Democrat could get some traction. Walden's views still represent the majority of voices in the district he said, but this year his margin of victory could drop to 60 percent, maybe lower.

Lunch said Walden's margin taking a significant drop would not be a surprise, but "it is a real stretch to see him losing."

Walden's closest margin was 61.2 percent in 1998, the first time he ran for Congress. Two years ago he won with almost 72 percent. A 12-point drop would show significant erosion of support, maybe enough to embolden Democrats and donors in the next election cycle.

Democrats nationwide have the opportunity to pick up as many as 110 seats in the U.S. House. But Lurch said that's not going to happen.

"I can see them picking up 50 seats," he said, in a wave akin to 2010 when Republicans gained 61.

In 80-90 percent of the races, he said, Republicans have better funding. Federal Elections Commission campaign financial summaries show Walden has more than \$3.1 million cash, while Jamie McLeod-Skinner leads the Democrats with just \$37,000.

Some of the Dems have not even met the \$5,000 threshold to report finances. Walden has spent more than \$930,000 already this election cycle, about six times as much as the entire field of seven Democrats has raised.

Walden came into office as a moderate Republican,

but how moderate he is today is debatable. Walden is firmly ensconced in Republican leadership, supporting both House Speaker Paul Ryan and President Donald Trump. Walden supported the health care bill that dropped coverage for pre-existing conditions after he said at Oregon townhalls that he would not.

That kind of back-tracking should give challengers openings to attack. But Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said the emotions surrounding the health care vote along with tax reform have subsided to some degree, even if the issues have yet to play out. Murdock, who is plugged into the area's politics, said the race has one overriding theme: No one is talking about it.

For challengers, silence does not bode well, and Walden's name recognition alone gives him a huge advantage in the race. Walden's seniority and leadership position in the House also help him to deliver on key issues, such as more funding for wildfires in the budget that passed the House on Thursday. And the needs in the district vary so much from one area to the next that single-issue candidates cannot cobble together a majority.

## Mounting caseloads keep DHS workers busy

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN  
STAFF WRITER

Child welfare caseworkers often spend money out of their own wallets, hours after the work day ends.

"I remember once I took a kid out of detention, and had to take him to Portland for drug and alcohol rehabilitation," said Jody Frost, the supervisor for DHS District 12, which oversees Child Welfare for the Department of Human Services in Umatilla and Morrow counties. "He came out wearing an orange jumpsuit. I had to take him and buy him clothes."

DHS workers face a challenging job — helping children and families in peril, while managing ever-growing caseloads.

The state's foster care system and DHS recently came under scrutiny. An audit of the state's foster care system released in January said the system's needs are mounting, and criticized practices such as case workers housing foster children in motel rooms. The audit made recommendations to DHS, including organizing its management system and finding a consistent plan to recruit foster parents.

Local case workers said they face the same issues as the state — a dearth of foster

parents, growing caseloads, and a lack of time to recruit new employees.

There are 5,256 foster homes statewide, including 106 in Umatilla and Morrow counties. Of those, 60 are relatives or somehow known to the foster children.

She said DHS always attempts to place children with family members, or with someone significant in their lives, such as a coach or a neighbor.

According to a DHS report, a total of 11,645 children statewide were in foster care for at least one day in fiscal year 2017. Of those, just over 4,000 entered the system that year.

Frost said the national average for caseworkers is eight new cases per month, while in her district it's 14 to 16.

"They're doing their best to ensure the child is safe while getting assigned new cases all the time," Frost said. A case can take anywhere from a few months to a few years to be resolved, and case worker is only reimbursed for \$150 per child for the life of the case, no matter how long.

"Caseworkers spend so much money out of their pockets," she said. "They buy kids lunch, haircuts."

She said the most needed



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Monica Gilbertson, with the Morrow County Department of Human Resources, looks through donated foster care bags as Ron Benage drops off more donations from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Hermiston on Tuesday in Boardman.

donations are hygiene items, baby wipes and diapers.

Frost said there are never enough general applicants to be foster parents.

According to the DHS audit, because of that shortage, many longtime foster families have been asked to take care of more children than they can handle.

"And very few are willing to take in teens," said Marvin Hamilton, a DHS certifier. Certifiers work with families on adoptions, and to make sure a family is ready to foster or adopt.

Many children enter foster care with high emotional needs, often the result

of abuse or neglect. Those challenges can deter potential foster parents, Frost said. Children with severe psychosocial or emotional disorders often need to be placed in behavioral rehabilitation services such as therapeutic foster care.

While there is some reimbursement for foster parenting, the audit said the recently-revised payment model is still inadequate, granting foster parents roughly \$26.50 per day.

There are other options to help foster children and families outside of full-time care, Hamilton said, including weekend and respite care.