

Major drug bust puts strain on local foster care system

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

Operation Wildfire, a January drug bust by the Blue Mountain Enforcement Narcotics Team, put 65 people from Umatilla, Morrow, Union and Gilliam counties behind bars. It also sent a wave of children into the foster care system.

According to Court Appointed Special Advocates, 38 children entered foster care in Umatilla County in January. At least eight families were involved with the drug bust, said Diane Shockman, the CASA volunteer coordinator for western Umatilla County.

“The reason kids were in danger is that non-safe people were frequenting their home, or they were in the car while mom or dad was selling drugs, reasons like that,” said Shockman.

Jesus Rome, the director of CASA, said the bust has had a trickle-down effect on families, with many kids taken away from home due to neglect. In his seven years at CASA, he said he’s never seen that many children come into foster care in a single month.

CASA works with a variety of organizations — including the Department of Human Services and the courts — as liaisons for foster care children.

“One day, we had six shelter hearings in Hermiston, and two in Pendleton,” he said. “Some had one child, but most had more than one.”



The Pendleton Convention Center served as a command and processing center for Operation Wildfire, a significant BENT drug bust that seized large amounts of drugs and involved at least 65 arrests.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Shelter hearings, which are court proceedings that happen when a child is removed from their home, must be held within 24 hours of a child being removed. Because there was such a large influx of children coming into the system, Shockman said many people were rushing to make sure children had places to go.

“Caseworkers were scrambling to find homes and places to put them, the legal teams were processing paperwork, Judge Temple was having hearings,” she said.

Shockman said many of the

children’s relatives stepped in and DHS was able to do emergency certifications so the children could stay with them.

Once a child is in foster care, there must be a discovery hearing within 30 days, and within 60 days they must have a jurisdictional hearing. At that time, the court also orders disposition, or determines where a child will be placed, as well as services for parent and child and visitation with family. Within the next six months, the court will have a permanency hearing to determine what the next

step should be for the child.

Though they’ve been removed from their homes, Shockman said the goal is almost always to reunite children with their parents.

“It’s so variable,” she said, noting that sometimes, a parent can’t have contact with their child. But even if they’re incarcerated, she said, they make an effort to let the child visit.

“We really bend over backward to reunite kids with their parents,” she said. “It’s in the best interest of the kids. But the kids’ timeline is so short — we can’t always wait for

parents to get their act together.”

She added that reunification is not a fast process. They need to be sure parents are serious before reuniting them with their children.

Charlie Clupny, a longtime CASA, said reunification is not always possible.

“I’m on a case where the kids were on a reunification track — then they were on a reunification/ adoption track, and now they’re on an adoption track,” he said.

Clupny said in that case, the parent did not commit a violent crime. She had been doing well and on track to get her children back, but then had a death in her family that affected her so badly, it set her back. The parent was not actively abusing her children, but was neglecting them.

“Which most of the cases are,” Rome said. “Unfortunately with drugs, people use and sell for lots of different reasons. It’s great that the police departments were proactive in getting them off the street. But the ripple effect of people that get caught in the system, like this mom — they were doing so well but then they relapse again.”

The children in foster care as a result of Operation Wildfire have not yet been paired up with CASAs, as there are not enough to serve every child right now.

“It’s a struggle to recruit men and minorities,” he said. But he said the program has grown, and now has about 40 volunteers serving nearly 90 kids.

Hermiston family celebrates Rare Disease Day

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Jacenda McKenzie-Richter is a zebra.

It’s a common metaphor in the medical world — when people hear hoofbeats they usually picture a horse, but they could be hearing a zebra. Likewise, when medical symptoms appear, physicians often assume they come from a common ailment instead of a rare disease.

Jacenda, 11, of Hermiston, has two rare diseases: mastocytosis and Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. Each year on Feb. 28, officially known as Rare Disease Day, she and her family make T-shirts with drawings of zebras to educate people about rare diseases. On Thursday her pink shirt featured a zebra with a unicorn horn.

Though she’s not often asked, Jacenda and her family take any opportunity they can get to talk about the disease.

“My really good friend Kirsten knows, and a couple of other good friends,” she said.

She said her teachers also know about her conditions.

When someone has an allergic reaction to a bee sting or food, their body produces an abundance of histamine, causing swelling, hives and other symptoms. Jacenda’s mother Dena Hill said mastocytosis causes Jacenda’s body to produce too much histamine every day. Even with taking a strong antihistamine daily, her skin sometimes shows reactions, and twice she has spontaneously gone into anaphylactic shock.

“She didn’t need a bee sting or anything,” Hill said.

About 1 in 10,000 people have mastocytosis, according to the National



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Dena Hill, left, and Jacenda McKenzie-Richter show off their zebra-unicorn shirts representing Jacenda’s two rare diseases.

Institutes of Health, but only 5 percent of them have the cutaneous form Jacenda has.

Her problems started right after she was born, when Hill started noticing odd bumps, welts and hives that would pop up then go away quickly. She kept bringing it up to doctors, who dismissed it.

“I was a single mom, 19, and I was never around babies so I didn’t know much,” she said. “But something didn’t seem right.”

One day when Jacenda was about a month old, Hill brought her to the emergency room with a blood-filled blister the size of a quarter on her wrist.

“I had a nurse basically accuse me of child abuse, saying I must have burned her with an iron,” Hill said.

The accusation stung, and Hill worried child pro-

ductive services would be called. She didn’t know it at the time, but it’s not uncommon for parents of children with rare diseases to be accused of child abuse when their child presents with unexplained bruises, broken bones or other symptoms.

Luckily for Hill, Jacenda’s pediatrician was supportive and started conducting research that finally ended with a proper diagnosis of cutaneous mastocytosis a couple of months later.

When Jacenda was five, her doctors started looking into the fact that she walked “floppy,” Hill said. After a few years of incorrect diagnoses she was finally genetically tested for and diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos, an inherited connective tissue disorder that manifests in a variety of ways, from thin skin to congeni-

tal hip dislocation. Jacenda has experienced heart problems, leg pain and ultra-soft skin.

Hill said having a serious illness or chronic disease is always difficult. But when the illness is something few people have heard of it adds an extra layer of stress.

Doctors might not believe patients, or might misdiagnose them and give them the wrong treatment. Some people with rare diseases suffer for years before finding a correct diagnosis, and sometimes there aren’t very effective treatments available because pharmaceutical companies and government entities would rather fund research for more common ailments.

“It’s hard,” Hill said. “You can feel really alone. Something like breast cancer, it’s horrible, but you’re not as alone. With a rare disease, you don’t see it on TV, you don’t see fundraisers for it. You’re lucky if you ever even get to meet someone else with it.”

She doesn’t want Jacenda to feel like her diagnoses are something to be ashamed of, so every year they celebrate Rare Disease Day on the last day of February. They make T-shirts with facts about mastocytosis and Ehlers-Danlos, plan a fun activity and let Jacenda pick out what they’re eating that day.

On Thursday, they celebrated the snow day with some sledding. Jacenda said she was excited for dinner:

Late snow extends warming station season

By HERMISTON HERALD

A late round of snow for Umatilla County is extending the Hermiston Warming Station’s season into March.

The warming station’s board had originally planned to close the emergency shelter last Friday, but will keep it open until at least March 14. Board chair Teesie Hill said they may provide services even longer if it looks like Hermiston will continue to see below-freezing temperatures or snow into late March.

Hill said the warming station has seen 16 or more people on a regular basis the last few weeks.

“The other night we had 18 people,” she said. “That’s a record for us.”

She said she thought they would be able to get enough volunteers to continue into March, but the warming station is running out of supplies and needs donations. The full list can be found on the Hermiston Warming Station Facebook page, but it includes laundry and cleaning supplies, hygiene items,

socks, gloves, hand warmers and hot drinks, such as coffee and apple cider.

Donations can be dropped off at the warming station, 1075 South Highway 395, on Wednesdays from 3-6 p.m. and Saturdays from 1-3 p.m. or by appointment (call 360-508-4523). People are asked not to drop off donations in the evenings to protect the confidentiality of guests.

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PET OF THE WEEK

Patch came into rescue after Pet Rescue contacted us about a dog brought into the shelter with a broken leg. He needed surgery for a double fractured leg and now has a fixator on his leg for 8 weeks. He is approx. a year old. Very sweet, playful little guy. Loves both cats and dogs. He will be up for adoption once healed. If you are interested in Patch please fill out an application. We can arrange for meets during his recovery time.

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BAKE AUCTION/RAFFLE
Friday, March 8th • 7pm
Regency Hermiston
970 W. Juniper Avenue

The family of Regency Hermiston is hosting a bake auction/raffle to raise money to help with medical expenses for Gary Myers who was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic stomach cancer.

Gary is the husband to our beloved employee Irma Myers. The auction will be held in our activities/long term dining hall.

Please come join us.

If you have questions or would like more information about what you can do to help, please call or text Jamie at 509.759.4719