

State funding could have Head Start seeking more qualified staff

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

Four years ago, Umatilla Morrow County Head Start had 150 staff members. This year, the organization has 285 positions and some of those are still waiting to be filled.

“That’s a huge growth curve for any organization,” said Executive Director Maureen McGrath. “Even in an urban center. For a rural population like ours, that’s huge.”

Gradually, the open positions are filling up. At the start of October, UMCHS reported there were 26 positions open and now there are 18. Over half of those have candidates who are now going through the background check process.

While the vacancies represent only a small percentage of the hundreds of employees that keep facilities open across eight counties in Eastern Oregon, the gaps are tangible, according to McGrath.

“One of the things we’ve experienced over the last five years is a huge surge in growth,” she said. “It leads to the need for more staff, and staff with specific qualifications.”

Last year, the organization had 67 employees get promoted, but open positions were left in their wake.

McGrath also noted the layoffs at Hinkle Railroad in Hermiston this past May saw the families of some employees leaving the area for different jobs.

This September, because of the number of open positions, the organization began early learning classes at some facilities a few weeks later than usual.

“We have a great team that is so willing to jump



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan, File
Becky Sanchez, left, holds a doll for one of her students at the Umatilla Morrow County Head Start Airport Way Discovery Center on Sept. 5, 2019.

(through) hoops,” said Myrna Valdez, human resources director at the organization.

Head Start programs are federally and state funded nonprofit organizations that provide early childhood education and other resources to low-income families. The Umatilla Morrow County Head Start is headquartered in Umatilla County. Last year, according to their annual report, their services reached more than 9,000 children and families.

And according to McGrath, these numbers could keep expanding thanks to state funding that she described as “legendary.”

Part of the billion-dollar Student Success Act signed into law by Gov. Kate Brown this year set aside \$44 million for Head Start programs, and \$22 million for Early Head Start, among other multimillion investments in early education.

“It was a historical moment,” McGrath said.

But with that moment, she said, could come the need for more qualified

staff members for Head Start programs across Oregon.

For Cay-Uma-Wa Head Start, a preschool program on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, it could also mean access to funds from the \$20 million Early Childhood Equity Fund, which passed along with the Student Success Act, for culturally specific early learning.

“We’re looking to strengthen our program, hopefully that fund can help our community,” said Lloyd Commander, director for Cay-Uma-Wa Head Start.

Commander said finding quality candidates for child care and early learning jobs can be difficult.

He said over the past few years, the Cay-Um-Wa — which serves 40 children and has eight positions — has seen some turnover, and it’s difficult to find people with the right licensure or educational background. But currently, they only have one more spot they’re trying to fill.

“Last year, they decided to turn to more ‘grow your

own,” he said. “We’ll have someone who doesn’t have those certifications and help them start their certification, so they can be qualified.”

It’s a problem that exists across the board.

“There’s a tricky balance right now. Early childhood education providers are the lowest paid teachers,” Robert Kleng, director of Eastern Oregon University Head Start said.

As far as open job listings go, there aren’t many in the early education sector unrelated to Head Start or other public programs. According to a study from OSU earlier this year, more than 50% of preschool-age child care spots are publicly funded.

On the UMCHS website, an open position for a preschool teacher in Pendleton offers \$14.77 an hour and requires an Early Childhood Education Certificate or Child Development Associate Certificate, CPR certification and a year of experience in a preschool-related program. It lists an associates degree in Early Childhood Education or a similar field as preferred.

“We need teachers. We need folks that are passionate about little kids and getting degrees that will give them the high capacity to do that. We’ll finally pay them what they deserve,” Kleng said.

McGrath expressed hope that the state funding would see more early educators getting paid more competitively.

“There’s an attempt to professionalize the field. Sometimes finding the heart and the qualifications, that’s a tall order,” she said. “These are careers that Oregon is saying are vital.”

Ride program sees use in first month

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

A new program providing Umatilla County residents transportation to work sold 180 tickets in its first month.

The West-End Workforce On-Demand Ride Cooperative, or WORC for short, began Oct. 1. It is a collaboration between the cities of Hermiston, Umatilla and Stanfield and provides subsidized vouchers for taxi rides to residents in those three cities’ ZIP codes to get to work.

Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith described it as a pilot program designed to help residents get work and local employers fill positions.

“This helps workers who struggle to find reliable transportation and makes sure businesses stay fully staffed and able to operate efficiently,” he said in a news release. “Through taxi programs and bus routes, we’re making sure everybody can get to where they need to be.”

The program is paid for by the state payroll tax for transportation. Residents who bring in proof of employment can purchase cards stamped with the address of their workplace,

to use as payment for rides to and from that address.

Prices vary depending on whether the card is good for transportation within a certain city/ZIP code or between cities, but a Hermiston-to-Hermiston card is \$2.50 per ride, with the state payroll tax funds picking up the other 65% of the cost.

Rides are provided by Hermiston Taxi Company, which also provides rides for a similar voucher program for senior and disabled residents that has been in place for several years. Smith said the city hopes people will mix and match the taxi programs with the HART, a free public bus service in Hermiston that runs from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday-Friday.

“For example, a teenager who doesn’t have a license but works an evening fast food shift could take the bus to work in the afternoon and then use a WORC taxi ticket to get home later at night,” he said. “This maximizes use of the taxi program rather than adding additional bus routes late into the evening when there are fewer riders.”

Anyone interested in WORC tickets can purchase them in sets of 10 at Hermiston City Hall, 180 N.E. Second St. They must provide proof of employment.

Woman arrested in attempted murder

HERMISTON HERALD

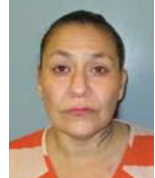
The Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office arrested Cristine Luzette Mendoza, 46, on charges of attempted murder, assault, menacing and unlawful use of a weapon.

Sheriff’s Lt. Sterrin Hol-

comb said deputies at about 5 p.m. Sunday responded to

31092 N. Baggett Lane, Hermiston, for a domestic violence call. The lieutenant said there was one victim.

Mendoza remains in the county jail in Pendleton in lieu of \$520,000 bail.



Mendoza



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