

# Students lack adequate nighttime residences

By KATHY ANEY  
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STAFF WRITERS

New data from the Oregon Department of Education shows the number of homeless students in Oregon increased 2% during the 2018-19 school year, continuing a trend over the last decade.

The number of students who receive the designation of homeless under McKinney-Vento have declined in the Hermiston School District in recent years, however.

Last year, 20 students were identified. That's less than half a percent of the student population in the region's largest district.

The district's liaison for homeless students, Lisa Depew, said that a tightening of the definition of homelessness by federal standards in recent years is a likely reason why.

"When this act was initially enforced, there were a lot of loopholes," she said. "They've really tightened those up."

But there's something else at play too, she thinks.

"Our district has done a good job at prevention," Depew said.

Depew said many students are eligible to receive free meals, clothing or educational support, regardless of whether they are eligible for the McKinney-Vento Assistance Program or not.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan  
**Bags of food await distribution at Highland Hills Elementary School in Hermiston on Friday afternoon. The bags, a part of the Agape House Backpack Program, are only a fraction of the roughly 185 bags that Agape House distributes each week to help feed kids on weekends when school meals are not available.**

Becoming identified as homeless is a process that starts at the individual school level in the Hermiston School District. Attendance issues or frequent relocation might be signs a student is without adequate shelter.

"There are little red flags, maybe during registration or while talking with a counselor, that may warrant a deeper conversation," she said.

Depew said that the Hermiston School District partners with the Mid-Columbia Bus Company to provide transportation to students who move often, so they have a chance to stay at the same school even if

it might mean altering a bus route or coordinating with another town while shelter is secured.

"You want to keep them at their school of origin," she said. "Studies have found that moving around a lot can disrupt a kid's progress."

She said that unstable housing can cause a lapse in personal care for a child, and result in low self-esteem and bullying.

The district, and neighboring districts, including Stanfield and Umatilla, partner with Eastern Oregon Mission's Agape House to provide food to elementary schoolers through the Backpack Program. Children

whose families are struggling with poverty and possibly homelessness are identified and sent home with a bag of easy-to-prepare non-perishables for the weekend.

Cathy Putnam, interim director for the Agape House, said the organization hands out 185 bags of food to children each Friday. Last week, Highland Hills Elementary School distributed 12 among their students, according to Principal Jake Bacon.

"A couple years ago, we were only doing a little under 100 bags per week," Putnam said. "I think that represents more of a need in our community."

Eastern Oregon Mission in Hermiston also runs Martha's House, a shelter where families can stay for up to six months to recuperate from displacement and financial stress. Over the summer, occupation at the house was low, but Putnam said that two new families moved in this month.

Putnam said there are children of all ages, from different areas in Umatilla County, living at Martha's House.

Lack of affordable housing is a key reason why families with children experience homelessness in its many varieties within Hermiston, according to Depew. Over half of last year's homeless students were doubled up in housing with other families.

"Hermiston has a ton of available housing out there. But for folks who are experiencing displacement, what is affordable?" she said.

Marie Shimer, director of educational services at the Morrow County School District, asked a similar question.

The district identified 126 students as homeless last year, a 20-student increase from the 2017-18 school year. That's over 5% of its student population. Shimer said that this year, there are students living in hotels and motels. Many of them are in families with migrant workers in the agricultural industry.

"We do see a trend upward," Shimer said. "A lot of that relates to the availability of housing in Irrigon and Boardman, and affordability, too."

In a recent press release, the department of education stated that money from the Student Success Act, which passed through the Oregon Legislature this year and will allot \$500 million to districts statewide, could wind up servicing homeless students.

Morrow County School District operates four days a week, and Shimer said that being able to extend operating hours could be a boon for students seeking a warm place to learn and access meals.

Both Hermiston and Morrow County school districts partner with countywide CARE teams. The teams provide referral-based social services and can provide assistance with enrolling in the Oregon Health Plan or transportation needs, for instance.

Morrow County School District Superintendent Dirk Dirksen said the district makes a point of providing services on-site in the form of counseling and physical health support. The district has CARE team employees on staff, too.

"It's critical these students are not running to five different agencies for support," he said.

## Local resources work to reduce falling risks among older population

By ALEX CASTLE  
FOR THE HERMISTON HERALD

More than 15% of Umatilla County's population is 65 or older, 2018 U.S. Census data showed, and according to a preliminary population report from Portland State University released last week, all of Oregon's population is growing older.

For people 65 and older, specifically, this comes with an increased risk of serious injury from falling.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 million older people are treated for fall injuries in emergency departments every year. Injuries range from broken bones — 300,000 older people are hospitalized for hip fractures every year — to concussions and other traumatic brain injuries.

Once somebody falls, the CDC says, their chances of falling again double. The result, regardless of injury, is also a heightened fear of falling, which can lead to lower activity levels and an enhanced risk of falling due to a weaker body.

To help combat the problem, Hermiston's Good Shepherd Health Care System provides interactive classes and other resources on fall prevention geared toward senior citizens.

Earlier this month, they held a two-hour fall prevention seminar that promoted healthy exercises to build strength and balance, along with education on recognizing the signs of a potential brain injury.

"A person may fall and hit their head but show no noticeable signs of a concussion," Good Shepherd community health educator Jessica Reker said.

Good Shepherd will be hosting another fall prevention seminar on Dec. 7, Reker said, with more planned throughout 2020.

For a longer, more in-depth class on fall prevention, Good Shepherd is also teaching a six-week course called Matter of Balance that begins in January. The class will be held at the Cottonwood Apartments in Hermiston, with another session planned at the senior center in the spring.

All of Good Shep-

herd's classes are free of charge and open to the public. Reker said they've had caregivers in class who have used what they learn to help their own clients.

In addition to its interactive classes, Good Shepherd also works directly with connection teams, Reker said, which are made up of community paramedics that go out to clients' homes and provide fall risk assessments.

"They'll look to see if there are rugs, what's the lighting like, are there stairs, what's the path to the bedroom like," she said.

The risk assessments are similar to those performed in the region by the Community Action Program of East Central Oregon's, or CAPECO's, Area Agency on Aging Department.

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