

EDITOR'S DESK

Communities have a responsibility to their homeless members

Homelessness is one of those perennial topics in the newspaper that we cover decade after decade, often with not much news to report beyond “Locals say something needs to be done.”

There are people in the community who have been serving Hermistonians living out of their cars or in tents, of course. The Hermiston Warming Station, Desert Rose Ministries, the Agape House and local churches are a few names that come to mind.

As Hermiston continues to strengthen its lead as Eastern Oregon's largest city, however, the time seems ripe to move beyond offering a meal or a night's stay on a cot during freezing weather and into a new phase of services. And with a credible proposal now on the table, it's time for a serious, community-wide conversation.

Recently, a group of locals formed Stepping Stones, a nonprofit that hopes to establish a year-round source of shelter for the homeless. They have put in significant planning, coordination and effort already, and are now seeking approval and financial support from the city of Hermiston.

The proposal is based on a model used by the Walla Walla Alliance for the Homeless, which include individual, lockable Conestoga huts for sleeping and a community building for activities, such as playing cards together or charging a cellphone. Paid security staff would supervise the camp, which would only be open to guests at night, and once it



Jade McDowell
NEWS EDITOR



HH file photo

A sign along Umatilla River Road prohibits camping in an area that served as a homeless camp in 2016 before the camp was disbanded by law enforcement.

gets going the board plans to add an “exiting homelessness” coordinator to help guests connect with the resources they need to eventually find a permanent home.

The small huts aren't equipped with their own electricity or running water, representing their purpose as a temporary shelter and not a permanent home. They do provide a clean bed, shelter, security and privacy that is a more humane option than sleeping under bushes or on a river bank.

I've listened to multiple presentations on the topic to the city council now, and overall the proposal seems well thought out, with plenty of provisions to address concerns about safety and nuisances. Recently, a

member of Stepping Stones told the council that she was working on a website with information about all of those details, which I think is an important step so that community members know exactly what is being proposed.

The next step, which is equally important, is for everyone to be given ample opportunity to voice their concerns and advocate for adjustments to the plan. The concerns I've heard are valid. Will the shelter bring increased crime to the businesses and residences nearby? Will it run into the same problems the Hermiston Warming Station has encountered in not being able to find enough volunteers to check people in for the night?

Is the plan financially sustainable? Should the city help fund it?

A first draft of any plan is never perfect, but this one is a very solid start, and I believe the community is better off going all in on discussing and refining this idea, rather than rejecting it for a vague notion that sometime in the future someone else might “do something about homelessness.”

I recently read of a controversy in which a popular Instagram influencer, under pressure from concerned viewers, admitted she had “rehomed” her adopted son after three years of caring for him.

People were rightly horrified at the idea that a parent would give up on their child because they no longer wanted to deal with that child's “behavioral issues” that were marring their idea of a perfect home. And yet many people advocate for their own cities to do the same thing with their residents who are homeless because of mental illness, addiction, criminal backgrounds or other factors that make them not “ideal” citizens.

“Send them to someone else to take care of them,” people say. “It's not fair for me to have to deal with the problems they are causing.”

Like many children who display difficult behavior after being adopted out of far from ideal circumstances, many of the members of our homeless population who are considered “difficult” also come from a place of trauma. They, too, can benefit from security and stability as they try to overcome their challenges. Each community should address that idea head on, rather than continuously hoping that someone else might take care of the problem.

COLUMN

Unemployment department also needs some work

Looking for work during a pandemic isn't an easy job. Not only have there been limited opportunities, but my age and an underlying health condition limit my options.

A friend recently asked me to fact-check a Facebook post that indicated Antifa was advertising on Craigslist. In an effort to recruit people to wreak havoc during Black Lives Matter protests, the job was said to pay \$25 an hour. While it appeared to be fake, I jokingly told my bestie that I should include the time I spent researching it as work seeking activities for my weekly unemployment claim form.

All joking aside, I find myself among some of the more fortunate in regards to unemployment insurance benefits. However, that's not to say I haven't had my issues with the Ore-

gon Employment Department.

A few weeks back I received a letter saying I needed to call within five days to clarify information or my benefits may be denied for the week in question. Five days from when? They mailed it on May 19, I received it on May 22 — and to complicate the countdown even more, May 25 was a holiday.

I was fearful that if my benefits were cut off, it would take an act of Congress to get them reinstated. I've read numerous articles regarding thousands of Oregonians who have yet to receive a single cent.

I figured if I could actually get through to a person to explain the situation, it would be quicker and easier than filling out the form. However, I heard about people trying to call for days — sometimes finally getting through only to be put on hold for hours, and then getting disconnected. After getting a busy signal on two different numbers for nearly two hours, I finally decided to complete the form and send it in.

The issue surrounded doing a freelance column, for which I claimed earnings and working a couple of hours for that week and none the next. If they had cross-referenced my weekly claim forms, they could have figured it out. It makes me wonder if someone actually looks at them. Also, given that the employment office is so far behind on processing claims, I find it a bit ironic that I'm the one being asked for further explanation.

My other issue is with how benefits are disbursed. The state sends a check for the first week, and then subsequent payments are loaded onto a debit card. I'm old school and not very fond of the ReliaCard. I wouldn't mind so much but it's affiliated with U.S. Bank — not that I have a problem with that particular financial institution, but we do our banking through a credit union.

When dealing with our accounts, I've ended up having to go to the drive-thru at both places. And one of the phe-

nomena that comes with being unemployed is losing track of what day it is. That happened recently as Memorial Day sneaked up on me. So, there I sat in seemingly never-ending lines on a holiday weekend.

Evidently, it's a simple process during pre-pandemic times to set up direct deposit for unemployment benefits. All you have to do is provide a canceled check. I did that seven weeks ago, yet thanks to the 'rona, my weekly benefits continue to be loaded onto my ReliaCard.

I shouldn't complain — at least I've been receiving weekly benefits since becoming eligible in early April. Also, we have a sufficient supply of toilet paper and recently were able to purchase hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes.

Tammy Malgesini, the former Hermiston Herald community editor, enjoys spending time with her husband and two German shepherds, as well as entertaining herself with random musings.



Tammy Malgesini

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

STATE REP. GREG SMITH, DISTRICT 57

900 Court St. NE, H-482
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1457

Email: Rep.GregSmith@state.or.us

STATE SEN. BILL HANSELL, DISTRICT 29

900 Court St. NE, S-423
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1729

Email: Sen.BillHansell@state.or.us

GOV. KATE BROWN

160 State Capitol
900 Court Street
Salem, OR 97301-4047
503-378-4582

Email: www.oregon.gov/gov/Pages/share-your-opinion.aspx

MAYOR DAVID DROTZMANN

180 NE Second St.
Hermiston, OR 97838
ddrotzmann@hermiston.or.us



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Chris Rush | Publisher • crush@eomediagroup.com • 541-278-2669

Jade McDowell | News Editor • jmcowell@eastoregonian.com • 541-564-4536

Jeanne Jewett | Multi-Media consultant • jjewett@hermistonherald.com • 541-564-4531

Audra Workman | Multi-Media consultant • aworkman@eastoregonian.com • 541-564-4538

To contact the Hermiston Herald for news, advertising or subscription information:
• call 541-567-6457
• e-mail info@hermistonherald.com
• stop by our offices at 333 E. Main St.
• visit us online at: hermistonherald.com

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No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. The Hermiston Herald reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content.

Letters must be original and signed by the writer or writers. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. Only the letter writer's name and city of residence will be published.

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