

Grants enhance mobility for veterans in rural communities

By JEFF BUDLONG
FOR THE HERMISTON HERALD

America's veterans provided a tremendous service to the nation. Now, Umatilla County has found a way to extend a helping hand to those veterans who need assistance to receive medical care.

Seven projects aimed at helping Oregon veterans in rural communities to more easily get to and from medical appointments received varying amounts of grant money last week. The grants are funded out of \$500,000 from the Oregon Lottery, with Umatilla County receiving \$20,000 and Union County \$50,000.

In Umatilla County, the money will be directed toward CareVan Transportation at Good Shepherd Health Care System and its affiliates. Services are provided to veterans in Hermiston, Echo, Stanfield and Umatilla.

"If a veteran has an appointment with a Good



HH file photo

A passenger disembarks from a CareVan at Good Shepherd Medical Center in 2016. CareVan is one of the recipients for grant dollars designed to increase mobility for veterans in Eastern Oregon.

Shepherd Health Care System doctor or physician or other services, they can make arrangements through CareVan," Umatilla County Transportation Coordinator

Staci Kunz said. "The CareVan would come to their home and pick them up for their appointment, and then return them to their home. "CareVan has been a free

service, but with the exception of one other source through Umatilla County and ODOT, it is the only source of funding it receives other than donations."

Union County's grant will aid an existing program that focuses on same-day demand available for health care access.

"We were looking for programs that could deliver origin to destination rides at no cost to the veteran," Regional Transit Coordinator for Eastern Oregon Frank Thomas said. "What that might mean or how that can look may look different in every community we serve."

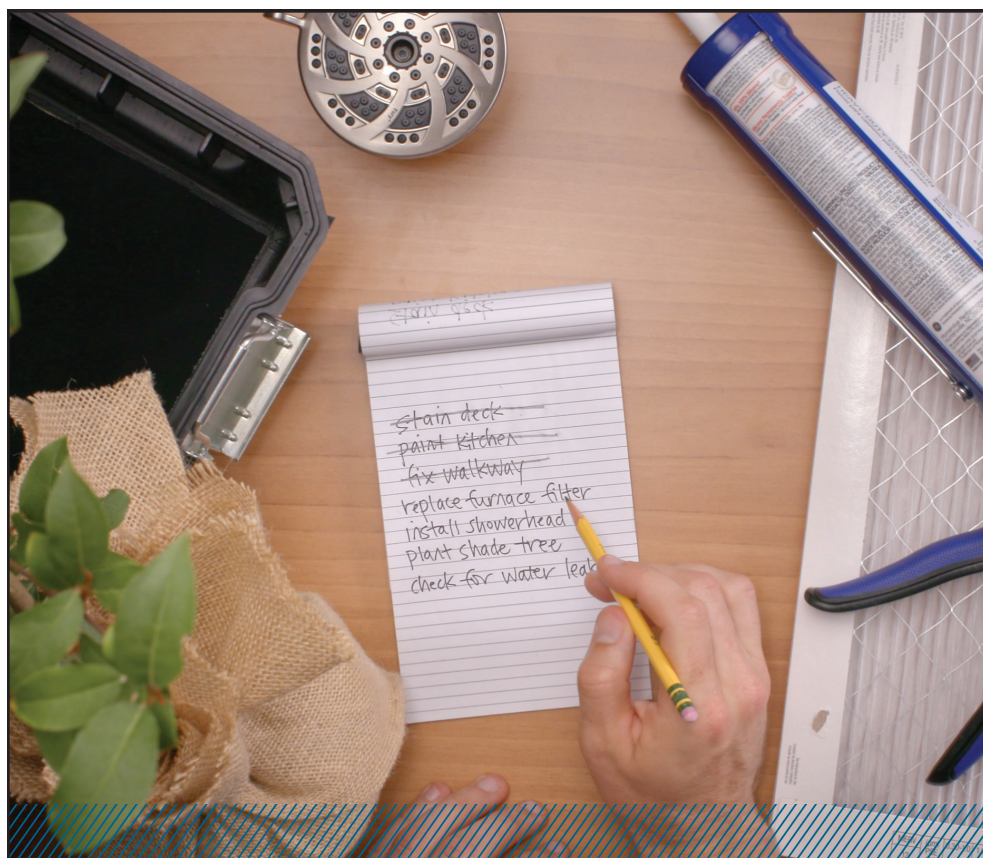
"We want to reduce the barriers between the folks who served us and the care they earned. Every one of the projects that were submitted did a pretty good job of that."

The first seven projects approved by the Oregon Transportation Commission totaled \$230,000 under the Rural Veterans' Healthcare Transportation Grant Program. The program is managed jointly by the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs and ODOT's Public Transportation Division.

There is a similar federal program, but Thomas said the big difference is the wide variety of medical options available through the grants.

"We worked closely with our partners at Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs ... to ensure that medical service could mean weight loss, smoking cessation, culturally appropriate medicine, acupuncture, behavioral health or any number of things," Thomas said. "The veteran is going to tell us what they need, and we are going to get them where they need to go."

The hope is to have all the paperwork processed so projects can begin by Aug. 1. A second round of grants will be awarded this year up to \$220,000. Due to COVID-19, the total grant money was reduced by 10% to ensure it would be available. All projects must be identified and the money used by June 30, 2021.



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New LED lighting at La Tapatia 2 makes shopping easier for customers while store owners save thousands in energy costs each year.

Inside the store, Alvarez also replaced all of the overhead fluorescent lighting with LEDs, which has helped lighten up darker corners. That makes it easier for customers to see what's on each store shelf. "The first day after installation, customers commented that they could see our products better," said Alvarez.

The upgrades inside and out are saving La Tapatia 2 an estimated \$2,600 each year in energy costs. But the store only had to pay about 20% of the \$34,000 project cost to purchase and install the new lighting, thanks to incentives offered by Energy Trust. Energy Trust is a nonprofit created by the State of Oregon to connect more people to sustainable, affordable energy and clean, renewable power.

Energy Trust provides cash incentives to individuals, businesses, schools, municipalities and others for equipment and projects that help use less energy.

Since 2002, Energy Trust has provided incentives to thousands of Gresham families, businesses, schools, farms and ranches for energy upgrades, helping Gresham utility customers save more than \$40 million on utility bills from participation in Energy Trust.

Visit energytrust.org/this-is-oregon to see more of how Energy Trust is helping small businesses around the state.

Projects meant to bring down utility bills are doing much more for small businesses in Oregon – some are making properties safer and more convenient for customers.

Juan Alvarez owns La Tapatia 2, a Mexican grocery and meat market in Gresham. He recently installed new energy-efficient LED lighting to replace the outdated lighting outside his store with help from Energy Trust of Oregon. Although he was looking for energy savings, the upgrade brought some additional, unexpected benefits to his business. Alvarez says his building is now safer and there's less vandalism.

"The new lighting is brighter and not easily breakable. Security is better. Customers and neighbors say it looks amazing."

— Juan Alvarez, owner of La Tapatia 2



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