

EDITOR'S DESK

We owe our veterans more than we have given them

This week we celebrate Veterans Day, honoring those who have served our country through military service.

While the parades and other events are a nice thank you, and a good opportunity to educate the next generation on the sacrifices veterans have made, the holiday feels like meager thanks for what we have been given in return.



Jade McDowell
NEWS EDITOR

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2019 about 4.7 million U.S. veterans — 25% of all veterans — had a disability that stemming from their service to our country. Others made different sacrifices, whether it was missing the birth of their child while deployed or losing friends to war. All entered military service knowing they could lose their life as a result.

It seems, in the face of such sacrifice, that veterans should be set up for life with medical care, jobs and other basic needs. Instead, they often worse off than the general public — more likely to be homeless, more likely to be unemployed, more likely to die by suicide.

As a country, we've made progress in our treatment of veterans. While words of thanks may feel hollow, there was a time they weren't even given that. When I interviewed Artie Keller Jr., a Vietnam veteran in



Echo student Kenneth Troxell shakes hands with Pendleton veteran Thomas Tangney during a Veterans Day parade in Echo in 2018.

Irrigon, in 2018, he described to me what it was like to hear people jeering and screaming “baby killer” at him as he was wheeled off an airplane on a stretcher with a hole in his leg that left him using a cane for life.

But our system as a whole is still lacking. In 2014, investigative reporting revealed that Veterans Affairs hospitals in some states were falsifying data to hide the fact they were unable to come anywhere close to meeting the mandates put in place about how quickly veterans must receive care. Some veterans died while waiting months to see a doctor about urgent health needs.

Since then, new improvements have been made to the VA system and new laws have been passed on behalf of veterans, but it can still be difficult to get care. Some well-intentioned laws have been unfunded mandates that sound good on paper but haven't had the funding to fully make them a reality. In 2019, the VA reported it had about 49,000 jobs unfilled across the country, mostly medical positions. One reason cited for the struggle to fill those positions is that those qualified for them would get paid more working in the private sector.

I'm not an expert in the pros and

cons of the specific reforms that have been suggested for veteran health care, but it seems clear the system needs work.

It also seems clear that improvements to other systems in this country — mental health care, addiction treatment, affordable housing, accessibility, etc. — can disproportionately benefit veterans, who are overrepresented in those categories.

So as you celebrate Veterans Day, think ahead to what you might do beyond the holiday.

You might consider voicing support to your elected officials for additional funding for veterans services, or specific legislation. Or you might contribute to local nonprofits, such as Desert Rose Ministries, the Hermiston Warming Station or the Agape House that help homeless residents. You could write letters to veterans who have been without visitors in local nursing homes since the pandemic hit. Or help out a veteran you know personally.

You can also share resources available for veterans. The national Veterans Crisis Line available to all veterans, service members and their families is 1-800-273-8255 (or text 838255 or visit veteranscrisisline.net for an online chat). Umatilla County Veterans Services can be reached at 541-667-3121, or the names and contact information of individual staff can be found at co.umatilla.or.us/AD/veterans.html.

COLUMN

Decriminalizing drugs affects livability

Though cliché to say, it is true, elections do have consequences.

I write these words for the sole purpose of asking our community to understand the repercussions of Ballot Measure 110 as it relates to local law enforcement. I do not write it as a political statement as I am appointed, not elected. If elected, I would have written this before the vote.



Jason Edmiston

Since my appointment in 2012, a goal of the Hermiston Police Department has been to focus on the livability of people who choose to call this incredible community home. As stated specifically from our goals, “a focus on those issues which impact the livability of the citizens we serve will high priority. This includes noise complaints, animal complaints, controlled substance enforcement, and all code issues including areas of blight consistent with the Broken Windows Theory of policing.”

During the 2017 Oregon legislative session, we saw the first major movement toward decriminalizing controlled substances, such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine. That degradation equates to hindered criminal investigations due to the arduous legalities involved with applying for and receiving a search warrant signed by a judge. Contrary

to crime shows on television, investigations must be slow and methodical and resources in Eastern Oregon are limited.

I would argue the majority of law enforcement officers across our nation understand the significance of taking away one's liberty and, though our criminal justice system may not be perfect, we appreciate the fact we are all innocent until proven guilty. With additional hoops to navigate and knowing there is little accountability on the front end, human nature comes into play, and many times, the path of least resistance is often the choice officers working with dwindling resources make.

What this means on our streets is an 85% reduction in drug enforcement over 15 years when looking at our 935 drug-related charges in 2004, versus the 140 drug-related charges in 2019. I used 2004 as a measure because that is when meth labs threatened the livability of our residents. People today still call us when their neighbor is outside smoking marijuana, or atypical foot and vehicle traffic coming and going from a suspected drug house is occurring. While that may adversely impact a caller's livability, there is next to nothing law enforcement can legally do. With continued decriminalization of controlled substances (now comparable to minor traffic violations), these calls for service are not going to get better for our

residents.

Ballot Measure 110, on the surface, appears to be a great move toward getting people into treatment. But, the realist in me cannot help but think about the absolute “kicking of the can” that has taken place in our state specific to mental health, homelessness, addiction, and crime in general. Haphazard spending decisions by the Oregon Legislature have forced police officers to become social workers trying to solve medical issues in the field. Daily calls for service involving people in crisis or under the influence are the new norm. Yet, Eastern Oregon receives next to no state resources and Ballot Measure 110 may further affect the livability of our residents, especially if Salem continues to forget about us.

Our department likes hiring officers who want to live here and raise their families here. But, we cannot fix every social ill thrust upon us without significant resources and changes in laws from our elected leaders at our state capitol. We are the only profession in the world trying to put ourselves out of business, but continued declines in livability through decriminalization will keep us busy even on those calls where our options are limited. For that, we apologize to our residents on the front end.

Jason Edmiston is chief of the Hermiston Police Department.

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SPEAK UP

Are you a parent who has been managing your children's distance learning while working from home, struggling to find child care or had to quit your job during the pandemic? The Hermiston Herald wants to hear from you about your experience this year. Submit a 250-word letter to the editor or a guest column of 400 to 650 words about your experience, along with your name, city of residence and phone number (phone number is for verification purposes and will not be published) and you may be published on the opinion page of an upcoming edition of the Hermiston Herald. Letters and columns can be sent to editor@hermistonherald.com or submitted via the letters form at www.hermistonherald.com.



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CORRECTIONS

It is the policy of the Hermiston Herald to correct errors as soon as they are discovered. Incorrect information will be corrected on Page 2A. Errors committed on the Opinion page will be corrected on that page. Corrections also are noted in the online versions of our stories.

Please contact the editor at editor@hermistonherald.com or call (541) 564-4533 with issues about this policy or to report errors.

SUBMIT A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters Policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for the Hermiston Herald readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters should be kept to 250 words.

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.

OBITUARY POLICY

The Hermiston Herald publishes paid obituaries. The obituary can include small photos and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge. Expanded death notices will be published at no charge. These include information about services. Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at hermistonherald.com/obituaryform, by email to obits@hermistonherald.com, by fax to 541-276-8314, placed via the funeral home or in person at the Hermiston Herald or East Oregonian offices. For more information, call 541-966-0818 or 1-800-522-0255, x221.