

CHARITIES

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source of donations, but then the employees who lost their jobs needed our help.”

Shearer’s Foods lost its facility in Hermiston in an explosion and fire on Feb. 22, putting 231 people out of work.

Inflation and the influx of migrant workers from the easing of coronavirus restraints increased demand as well, Gomolski continued, and homelessness jumped up to about 200 per month from 30 to 40.

“In 2021, our average number of households served was 428, with 1,397 people,” he said. Recent (March 2022) stats were 850 households and 3,002 individuals.

The food bank also relies on 26 to 37 volunteers on average, he said, working about 160 hours per month.

Abercrombie with the Irrigon Emergency Assistance Center cited increased numbers of homeless people passing through her service area.

“They stay a few days or a week or two,” she said. “We make sure that they have easily prepared food.”

And there has been a “pretty big uptick” in emergency aid, she added.

“Rent has gone up. Donations from big corporations have fallen. We still get help from local businesses and the state,” she said. “I also write grants.”

But less federal aid has caused more families to return to the center.

“All the pantries have seen large increases in demand,” Patton added. “We have made up more food boxes than ever. Last month was a record 166 food boxes. Our boxes don’t have random contents. They contain the ingredients for a meal.”

The U. S. Department of Agriculture raising the amount of food aid for which people are eligible has helped, she said, and explained about 80% of the Neighborhood Center of South Morrow County’s food comes from the Oregon Food Bank, via Community Action



Hermiston Herald, File

Lois Cram, right, stocks shelves at Agape House in Hermiston on April 15, 2020, for the organization's backpack program. Now as the pandemic wanes two years later, Agape House and other local charities report an increasing number of clients, a decline in donations, increases in pricing and supply shortages.



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

A homeless man pushes a grocery cart full of his possessions across Dorion Avenue in Pendleton on April 5, 2022. Local charities are reporting a struggle to meet the demands for needs as the pandemic subsides.

Program of East Central Oregon, and 20% from local donations and sources.

“We buy from local groceries, so

that monetary donations stay local. We are a concierge of services,” Patton said. “Besides our pantry and thrift store, we provide emergency

aid and help people find the support they need.”

Working with partners, outreach essential

Gomolski cited partnerships, such as with Jose Garcia’s New Horizons for outreach to farm workers. County coronavirus relief funds also helped Agape House get an enclosed trailer to deliver food to migrant workers in the field on Fridays.

“The workers’ hours and our open schedule mean that they can’t come to Agape House, so we reach out,” he said. “Now it’s planting season, so the number of migrant workers’ families has grown from 120 to 300.”

Agape House also runs a backpack program for youths, Gomolski said, that covers 270 students per week in Hermiston, Echo, Stanfield and Irrigon. The program’s cost has ballooned from

\$4,000 to \$9,000.

“Amazon donated to this program,” he said. “We’re grateful for every partner.”

Gomolski said Agape House also has partnered with the American Legion in outreach programs for needy veterans. Seniors on fixed incomes now benefit as well.

“Inflation makes it harder to serve people, while increasing their needs,” he concluded. “Peanut butter costs \$3 per container. Even little boxes of raisins are hard to find. It might sound trivial, but it’s a real problem.”

Patton said some clients struggle with asking for help, so outreach is crucial to these efforts.

“Asking for help feels like begging to them,” she said. “So we have to reach out, let them know what’s available and that we understand that almost everyone needs help sometime, especially in tough economic times like these.”

TEAM

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his first year in robotics, he said, and he liked meeting other students from different countries. He also said he was impressed with a jumping robot in the contest.

Rafael Garcia-Sanchez, freshman, said the trip was quite an experience.

“I got to meet a lot of people from different states, eat at Chick-fil-A, eat some Chinese food, and I want to go back,” he said.

Seeing him come off the bus, his mother, Maria D. Sanchez, rushed over to him and gave him a big hug.

“My boy is home,” she said.

There were other family members at the arrival Tess White, who went on the trip with the team, is the mother of Heidi Sipe, Umatilla School District superintendent, who was on the trip, too. White said the competition was “incredible” and the Umatilla kids were “amazing.”

Seeing the great size of the event, and the skill of the competitors, she described herself as overwhelmed. She said that everyone there represents the top 1% of all students who are doing this sort of work. For Umatilla to be part of that select group, then,

was “just wonderful,” she said.

Heidi Sipe, who was standing at the bus with her mother and the departing students, agreed. She said Confidential was part of something special, and the team members did “really well.”

“The best thing was that they were surrounded by so many excellent people and teams,” she said. “They got a real experience, they got to see the strengths of those teams, and they learned what they can do next time.”

Key takeaways from the coach

Kyle Sipe, robotics coach, agrees with others in saying Confidential could return to Houston next year. For that to happen, though, he stated it must once again qualify for the contest. He said the team must learn from its mistakes and work to be even more competitive.

Team members spoke with different teams to see how they were organized, according to the coach. Confidential plans to follow the examples set by other teams, revisiting their organizational structure, separating members of different skills and assigning them to different parts of each build.

“There is so much learning,” he said.

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