



# Oregon

John A. Kitzhaber, MD, Governor

## Oregon Youth Authority

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### **GUEST OPINION**

(This guest opinion was published by The Observer in La Grande.)



### **Community partners with RiverBend**

By Brian Blisard

When my phone rings, I'm always happy if the caller is a member of the community asking for something. That's because when the community asks for the help of youth offenders at the RiverBend transitional facility, you are supporting public safety and youth reformation.

You may have encountered RiverBend youth working in the community as a result of these calls. Youth go out on a variety of staff-supervised community service projects.

RiverBend youth help maintain La Grande city parks and implement the master restoration plan for Morgan Lake southwest of town. They refinished antique wheels for the Union County Museum. They volunteer at the library, animal shelter and food bank, and cut firewood for the parks and shovel sidewalks for seniors during the winter. During the holidays, they made 50 wooden toys – trains, helicopters, puzzles – for Toys for Joy and Shelter from the Storm in La Grande.

RiverBend is a transitional facility. We do the final work of preparing youth offenders to return to the community as productive, crime-free citizens. Before youth come to RiverBend, they receive evidence-based treatment, year-round schooling and useful vocational opportunities in another of the Oregon Youth Authority's close-custody facilities.

Because your support of these youth is so important, I have formed a community advisory committee to promote two-way communication with the community. Members include Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen, La Grande and state police, a contract psychologist, volunteers, and representatives of Community Connections and the state forestry, parks and transportation departments. A family representative is being added.

I want the community to know what we do, including how we protect community safety and reduce crime while giving youth offenders opportunities to reform in OYA's safe environments.

We prize opportunities that boost job and career prospects for youth. Recently, RiverBend youth had a chance to learn wind dynamics by building tabletop windmills from kits provided by the Bonneville Power Foundation. Then six youth visited a Horizon Wind Energy facility where they learned about careers in wind energy and wrote papers about the field trip. Many youth projects are undertaken through our high school, whose staff is provided by the Umatilla-Morrow ESD.

RiverBend also offers an unusual vocational opportunity: We have our own wastewater treatment plant, where youth can learn skills preparing them to take a state DEQ exam that can qualify them for good jobs in the community. One youth recently passed the test and is awaiting his license.

You can see why we like community service projects that help youth learn. (Our ability to meet community requests, of course, is limited by whether we have staff available to supervise youth.)

We try to instill empathy in offenders and teach them that they strengthen communities and themselves when they give back. A year ago, RiverBend paroled a youth who had earned his undergraduate degree online while incarcerated. Now he's completing his first year of law school and – this is important – he's coaching kids' hockey and teaching "street law" to at-risk high school youth.

As one OYA foster parent says, our work in juvenile corrections seeks to help youth "become the person we know is really in there." At RiverBend, we appreciate the community's support in helping us do that.

*Brian Blisard of Island City is superintendent of the RiverBend youth transitional facility near Hilgard State Park, one of 11 facilities operated statewide by the Oregon Youth Authority. His e-mail is [brian.blisard@oya.state.or.us](mailto:brian.blisard@oya.state.or.us).*

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