

Rural Housing Service • Community Facilities Program

Help is On the Way: Equipping a Rural Search and Rescue Team

Wheeler County Search and Rescue, as with many rural emergency departments, has a limited budget and could not afford essential equipment. This entirely volunteer team borrowed supplies from the Sheriff's Office, but most volunteers supplied their equipment, and the medics even purchased their own supplies.

The lack of dedicated equipment was problematic for these emergency responders that serve a sparsely populated, large geographic area in central Oregon. The volunteers used different types of equipment, making it difficult to train together. They worried about grabbing the wrong bag as they rushed out the door as some were not fully equipped. And the county did not want their volunteers to continue buying supplies.

The county's Economic Development Director suggested USDA Rural Development's [Community Facilities Program](#), which can finance not only rural facilities, but also the purchase of equipment. They applied and were awarded a \$10,156 grant, and they received \$9,000 in matching funds from the nonprofit Oregon Community Foundation. With this funding, they were able to purchase radios, ropes and harnesses, life vests and other water rescue equipment, first aid supplies, and a wheeled litter designed for rugged terrain called a mule.

"We've already used the mule several times," said Brenda Snow Potter, County Finance and Administration Officer, including to rescue a diabetic hiker this fall.

Most of the county is mountainous, and many of the highways and forest roads run along windy, steep hills and canyons. With scenic attractions like the Ochoco Mountains and John Day River, the county draws many hikers and hunters. The search and rescue team often responds when a car has crashed down a steep embankment, when a hiker is lost, or when someone needs to be rescued from the river.

"This grant was huge for us," said Potter. "It ensures the safety of our volunteers and makes us more efficient. I cannot express enough our appreciation for USDA and the help we received from LaDonn," the Community Programs Specialist who processed their grant application.

They now train on the same equipment, can respond more quickly during a rescue, do not have to buy medical supplies out of pocket, and can better ensure their own safety when responding to an emergency.



The volunteers that make up the Wheeler County Search and Rescue team now have the necessary equipment to safely conduct rescues and treat patients.

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| Obligation Amount: | \$10,156.88 grant |
| Date of Obligation: | May 2018 |
| Congressional District: | Representative Walden, District 2; Senators Wyden and Merkley |
| Partners: | Oregon Community Foundation, \$9,000 |
| Demographics: | Wheeler County, population 1,357 |
| Impact: | The Wheeler County Search and Rescue team now has the equipment necessary to respond to emergencies while ensuring the safety of their volunteers. |
