



**HOOD RIVER COUNTY**

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Belinda Ballah salutes the efforts of local kids her department mobilizes, to help prevent underage tobacco, alcohol, weapon and drug use.

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**Belinda Ballah, the County's new Prevention Department Director, brings a fresh perspective and longtime community experience, to helping Hood River kids grow up healthy**

Belinda Ballah was recently named the new Director of Hood River County Prevention Department, but she is not new to drug/alcohol/tobacco prevention, youth services or Hood River County. Her career in reaching youth includes work as the County's Drug/Tobacco Certified Prevention Specialist, 13 years at Hood River Middle School as a special education Instructional Assistant and coach for kids with behavioral challenges, and extensive youth outreach for Hood River Alliance Church.

The Prevention Department team, including Ballah, is committed to helping people. Ballah's career focus has been on reaching kids to help them make healthy choices, mobilizing local youth's unique perspectives and creativity, helping families overcome personal or traumatic challenges and helping our community reach its full, healthy potential. With longtime volunteer service to TIP, now known as crisis response team, she may be called in to our local hospital, homes or agencies to serve as a family resource in a time of tragedy.

"Our whole community is very health focused. Our department's focus is on helping kids grow up and thrive in our healthy Gorge environment. While we can't protect kids from everything, we can work together as a community to help them flourish," Ballah said.

Youth are at the core of the Prevention Department's mission, specifically helping kids navigate a complex world of conflicting lifestyle choices. Ballah worked with longtime leaders Joella Dethman and Maija Yasui,

who both recently retired from the Hood River County Commission on Children and Families, now known as the Hood River County Prevention Department. Now, Ballah leads the charge, as her department helps kids make wise choices by avoiding drugs, tobacco, and alcohol, and carrying this prevention message to their peers and community.

Kids' passion for this subject is evident in the football-stadium-size murals completed in 2013 at Wy'East Middle School, featuring school eagle mascot Tuffy, soaring over Mount Hood, reminding us that "Soaring Above the Influence" is cool. Wy'East kids worked with the Prevention Department and a local professional artist to design two spectacular bilingual drug, smoke, alcohol and weapon prevention murals. The Wy'East "Soaring Above the Influence" video can be viewed on *YouTube* at <http://Wy'East Soaring>.

Teens in HEALTH (Help, Educate, Advocate, Lead Towards Health) Media Clubs at HRV High School, Wy'East and Hood River Middle Schools design ad campaigns that encourage a tobacco and drug-free lifestyle. Their handiwork (and their smiles) are featured on movie theater trailers and newspaper articles.

For this 4<sup>th</sup> of July, teens designed stickers and plastered them on 3500 cases of beer sold at local retail stores, reminding adults not to drink and drive or provide alcohol to minors.

Kids are part of the solution in Prevention, but so is coalition building - working together, from a whole community perspective. One of the Prevention Department's coalitions brings together partner agencies, parents, and interested community members, including business leaders in Odell to reach families of migrant farm workers and help educate local Hispanic kids and families.

Local Hood River faces are stars on the State's [www.SmokeFreeOregon.com](http://www.SmokeFreeOregon.com) website, speaking from a variety of viewpoints – store owner, HRV teens, Parks Department, County officials and Hispanic community members – these locals are now State spokespersons for bringing communities together for the common good.

Hood River County develops policies to help improve community outcomes. The community norm for allowing smoking is changing as more and more businesses and agencies move toward becoming tobacco, smoke and vape free.

One of the major focuses for the department this fall will be addressing how the new marijuana laws will impact youth and public safety. Ballah, like County public safety officials, wants to help protect youth from a potential new underage drug problem, as the availability of marijuana rises. At the same time, it will be important to counteract the public perception that the harm marijuana inflicts on kids lowers with loosened laws. Experts are concerned that the legalization of marijuana for adults will increase kids' access to, and use of, marijuana, although it remains illegal for people under age 21.

In her personal time, Ballah also focuses on youth and family - her husband, kids and grandkids, all Gorge residents. She also enjoys horseback riding.

#### About Hood River County

Hood River County is a local not-for-profit government organization managing core community services to support a healthy, thriving Hood River. The County maintains road and bridges, county parks and forests; provides law enforcement, emergency services and 911, community planning, prevention and juvenile intervention, public health services, veteran's services and county records. ###