

# **Siskiyou Community Forum**

**May 19, 2025**

**Gazelle Grange Hall, Gazelle, CA**



**Sponsored by the Siskiyou Community Alliance**

## **Speakers Summary**

### **Introduction**

Arend Thomas, representing the Siskiyou Community Alliance - a newly formed nonpartisan group - opened the forum by welcoming attendees and emphasizing the importance of accurate and up-to-date information concerning national developments and their effects on Siskiyou County communities. The Alliance strives to engage with local, state, and federal officials to ensure accurate and relevant data and insights are accessible to residents. Thomas introduced the Alliance members and outlined the forum's format, which included a panel of speakers followed by a question-and-answer session, recording availability, and distribution of anonymous surveys to guide the Alliance's future initiatives.

### **Steve Bryan - Siskiyou Community Resource Collaborative**

Steve Bryan is the Executive Director of the Siskiyou Community Resource Collaborative (SCRC) which oversees 7 Community Resource Centers (CRC's) located in Dunsmuir, Mt. Shasta, McCloud, Weed, Yreka, Montague and Scott Valley. They also provide support to community agencies in Hornbrook, Tule Lake and Happy Camp.

A major project for the SCRC has been a digital literacy program that teaches people how to utilize computers and navigate safely on the internet and will help those who can't afford the internet be able to afford it. This fosters independence, consistent with the SCRC's goal to "provide a hand up, not a hand out." This independence is more important than ever as accessing services such as Social Security are increasingly requiring computer based interactions.

The SCRC has a grant from the state to support this program, but although the relevant contracts had been signed, the funds were frozen due to the uncertainty created by changes at the federal level. Fortunately, due to the diversity of the organization, the SCRC was able to survive the loss of the state grant so the program continues. For example, Siskiyou County Supervisor Ed Valenzuela is assisting the SCRC with a second opportunity to provide digital literacy services.

Another key service that has been affected is the Senior Community Service Employment Program that is administered through AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons) with federal funds. This program pays seniors to get back into the workforce. The SCRC employs senior citizens through this program, but the hours for this program have been cut by almost half.

Mr. Bryan stated that we are very fortunate to have several well-rooted, local foundations who care a great deal about our county. However, federal funding freezes have created a dual squeeze on nonprofits, limiting government contracts while increasing pressure on these foundations.

### **Marie Caldwell - Education and Workforce Development**

Marie Caldwell, Superintendent of Siskiyou Union High School District, (SUHSD) discussed the impacts of federal funding uncertainties on education and local workforce development. She explained that the district comprises four smaller high schools resulting from original reorganization, emphasizing the importance of keeping students in the community by preparing them for high-skill, high-wage jobs. Caldwell expressed concern about the diminishing federal and state funding for jobs especially related to natural resource management, such as firefighting, fuel reduction, and forest management—noting these sectors are critical for local economic stability and wildfire resilience.

She pointed out that the current climate was chaotic and uncertain, citing another program greatly impacted, Americorps. She received an email on a Friday stating that funding had been frozen and then the next day, a directive to tell her workers not to come to work on Monday. One of these workers is pregnant and depends on this job for her health insurance.

Caldwell stated that federal monies the schools receive often come through the state, via the County Office of Education. Currently \$2 million in Federal Forest Reserve Funding has not been reauthorized, of which \$115,000 is slated for SUHSD. This is the cost of approximately one teacher.

Ms. Caldwell is part of a national team that will be travelling to Washington D.C. mid June to meet with government officials to discuss these issues.

### **Sheriff LaRue - Public Safety**

Sheriff Jeremiah Larue has been in law enforcement for 20 years, the last four as Siskiyou County Sheriff Coroner. Prior to this, he was a lieutenant with the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office. He has served in numerous other capacities within the department, including search and rescue training, director of the law enforcement academy at College of the Siskiyous, and community engagement. He stated that he is strongly committed to protecting and defending the community and serving those who have put their trust in him as sheriff of Siskiyou County. He stated that he recognizes that this is a time of uncertainty, but that at this point in time there is the potential that law enforcement is actually going to get more federal funding for training, equipment and personnel. Sheriff LaRue also stated that he is grateful for support from the county supervisors. In response to questions about immigrants, deportation, and Immigration

and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Sheriff LaRue stated that the sheriff's department is not involved in arresting, detaining or deporting immigrants, and that in fact California state law restricts local law enforcement from assisting ICE with immigration enforcement. He ended his presentation by stressing that he works for the people, takes that burden very seriously, and wants to serve well.

### **Dr. Char Perlas - College of the Siskiyous**

Dr. Perlas, President of the College of the Siskiyous (COS), has extensive experience in the community college system that spans over 25 years, the last four at COS. COS, the only institute of higher learning in Siskiyou county, provides a number of high quality instructional programs including Police and Fire Academies. Things are changing at a rapid pace, causing significant challenges amid the rapid policy shifts and funding uncertainties.

Siskiyou County's poverty rate is 16.7%, which is above the national average of 12%. This means many students rely heavily on financial aid and supportive college programs.

COS is funded by a General fund, 70% of which comes from enrollment and 30% is supplemental and includes financial aid. For example, Pell grants are federally funded grants for students with exceptional financial need. Currently, a full-time student at COS carries 12 units per semester. With proposed federal changes to the Pell Grant program, eligibility would switch to 15 units per semester for full-time status. The impact of this change to COS would be to reduce student aid by approximately \$1,800 per student and shrink overall college funding.

The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are outreach and student services programs administered by the US Department of Education and designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Dr. Perlas highlighted the longstanding, successful TRIO programs that support K-12 and community college students retention and success. The funds support programs like Upward Bound, Talent Search, and other Student Support Services. The Federal Work Study program which enables students to work on campus, is part of TRIO. TRIO has had a robust presence in Siskiyou county since 2005, but is now at risk of being cut.

Federal funding also underpins Career Technical Education (CTE), which is essential for training the future workforce in Siskiyou County. She also noted the apparent contradiction between tariffs intended to bring back jobs, and cuts to programs that train workers for those jobs.

Overall, the college is struggling to maintain focus and planning amidst the constant flux and "chaos" created by inconsistent regulations and executive orders.

### **Cathy Scott - Child Care Planning Council**

Cathy Scott, the Child Care Planning Council Coordinator for Siskiyou County, has the responsibility to stay informed about current legislation that affects child care in our region. She also conducts needs assessments and develops strategic plans to identify and address child care issues and needs in our community.

Scott pointed out that child care is important for society, “Nobody’s going to work without childcare. So it’s crucial to a healthy local economy”. Federal Child Care Development Block Grants (CCDBG), administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, directly support several very important programs in Siskiyou County. The Alternative Payment program helps low income workers afford child care, and the CalWorks program provides child care support for participants while they look for work. CCDBG funds are also funneled through state preschool programs.

Preschool Development Grants, also under the Department of Health and Human Services, provide funding for programs that support childcare providers by giving incentives for professional learning and for degree attainment to ensure sustainable, quality child care in Siskiyou County. Support for quality materials and facility renovation is also provided through this program.

With the drastic cuts to the US Department of Education the Migrant Education Program has been eliminated. The program has been important in Siskiyou County for supporting English language learners. Scott noted, “English as a second language is huge in the early childhood field because when they’re young is when they can actually learn that second language.” The program facilitated the integration of English language learners into our local communities.

“And then there is Head Start, which is a huge player in the early childhood landscape,” Scott said. Head Start is a social services program fully funded through the US Department of Health and Human Services. It has a proven track record for reducing poverty. Head Start not only provides high quality education services to children, it also provides support services to families: “...it’s just an endless list of things that Head Start can do for families.” Scott stressed that every dollar invested in Head Start returns eight dollars in future savings by reducing poverty-related outcomes. Despite recent budget threats and furloughs, grassroots public advocacy preserved Head Start funding in the latest budget cycle, demonstrating the power of community action. Scott encouraged ongoing public engagement to protect these vital programs, since the future is unknown beyond the current budget year.

### **Nancy Swift - Jefferson Economic Development Institute (JEDI)**

Nancy Swift has been the executive director of Jefferson Economic Development Institute (JEDI), for the last 30 years. JEDI is a community economic development nonprofit dedicated to helping men and women start and grow small businesses as a means to transform their own lives and our communities. “The small businesses in this county are so critical. They provide 90% of our jobs and they are always answering a need,” Swift stressed.

JEDI runs three programs, each of which either have a federal designation or federal support. One is the Mount Shasta Farmers Market, which kicked off the 2025 season just a few hours before the forum began. Another is the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program which provides free tax preparation for seniors and low wage earners. The program is funded in part by the IRS with matching funds from local sources. “[IRS] funding isn’t in jeopardy at the moment,” Swift said, but pointed out that the IRS is cooperating with ICE in providing private information about some taxpayers. Our communities are being affected as evidenced by JEDI

already seeing a decline in the number of people with Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) coming to the office to file taxes and a decline in the number of applications for ITINs. An ITIN is a number issued by the IRS to someone who needs a US taxpayer identification number for federal tax purposes but is not eligible for a social security number.

The third designation is the Women's Business Center, that is, a US Small Business Administration (SBA) designated center that provides entrepreneurial development services helping people get capital, training, and education and, when necessary, providing advocacy at city hall around certain regulations that would serve businesses better. "That program wasn't so lucky," Swift stated, "and is in the President's budget to be eliminated." Swift noted that losing the Women's Business Center designation would result in JEDI losing some of its ability to leverage other funds; "We've had to talk about our services differently" because of the loss of the program.

Swift noted that many small businesses contract with the federal government and with impending drastic cuts to the federal budget, many jobs will be lost in our county. Swift closed her statement noting that she was present to be in communication. The forum was beneficial not only for the exchange of information between the community and the speakers, but also to hear what the other speakers are going through. She stressed the importance of expanding the already existing partnerships and collaborations to "help people stay alive together."

#### **Dr. Daniel Axelrod - National Weather Service and Meteorology**

Dr. Axelrod, professor emeritus and local weather data enthusiast, provided an in-depth briefing on the National Weather Service (NWS) and the likely impacts of federal budget cuts on weather prediction capabilities. NOAA, and its major division, the NWS (National Weather Service), issue hazard warnings about pending windstorms, flooding from atmospheric rivers, blizzards, ice storms, snowstorms, avalanches, severe thunderstorms, heat waves, road and travel dangers, aviation, and red flag warnings about wildfire potential. All of this is free to the public in the interest of public safety

The initial plans of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for the coming fiscal year call for NOAA to get a cut of 28% in 2025 and another 38% in 2026. The budget slashes all funding related to research on climate and weather. Since the beginning of the year, more than 550 employees have left the National Weather Service across the country, thereby reducing the staffing level by 10%.

The NWS in Oregon employed a total of 100 people across its four offices, including our closest office in Medford. These offices are now down to a total of 30-40 people and are now unable to provide overnight staffing. Those who have lost jobs include meteorologists, hydrologists and technicians that maintain sensitive weather equipment including radar.

The aspect of meteorology that will take the heaviest hit is climate prediction. Eliminating "wokeness" (which includes concern about climate change) in NOAA's programs is a stated goal of the cutbacks. But the real goal is privatization of weather services. Project 2025, the

blueprint for many of the cuts and largely written by the current director of the OMB, explicitly proposed that the Weather Service "fully commercialize" its forecasting.

---

### **Overall Themes and Insights**

The forum painted a vivid picture of a Siskiyou County grappling with the consequences of shifting federal policies, funding freezes, and political priorities that directly impact public services, education, community resources, economic development, and safety infrastructure. Common threads included a greater than the national average reliance on federal and state funding for critical programs; the challenges posed by abrupt contract terminations and budget uncertainty; the vital role of community advocacy and local foundations in sustaining services; and the pressing need for transparency, collaboration, and resilience across public and nonprofit sectors. Whether addressing digital literacy, workforce development, child care, small business support, or weather forecasting, speakers underscored that these interconnected systems form the backbone of the county's well-being and must be actively protected and supported.

### **Key Recommendations and Calls to Action**

- Continued community engagement in advocacy to preserve and restore critical funding for social, educational, and infrastructure programs.
- Support for rural-specific initiatives through policy advocacy, national coalitions, and strategic federal engagement.
- Enhanced collaboration among local nonprofits, government agencies, and foundations to maximize resource efficiency and program sustainability.
- Public education on the implications of federal policy shifts, encouraging constituents to communicate with representatives about priorities.
- Vigilance regarding changes in essential services like weather forecasting, with awareness of potential service privatization that could undermine equitable access to life-saving information.

The Siskiyou Community Alliance's forum thus serves as both an informational platform and a call for concerted community effort to address the evolving challenges facing rural Siskiyou County in the face of national policy developments.

*Compiled by the Siskiyou Community Alliance Team.*