

THE ECHO

Created by incarcerated people



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EASTERN OREGON CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION

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FAMILY TIME AT EOCI

EOCI Holds First Outdoor Family Event of 2025

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with Shahid Baskerville



Photo by Phillip Luna/The Echo

Beau Wilcox's children jump into his arms during EOCI's family barbeque on June 14, 2025. More than 180 residents and their families attended the first of two events scheduled for the year.

A child gleefully squeals as their father chases them across a grassy lawn. The sizzling, smoky scent of barbequed burgers and bratwursts wafts across picnic tables under the shade of tents. Kids with snow cone stained

faces and sticky cotton candy hands clamber through a bouncy house. Live music plays as people mingle about. It's a good ol' community barbeque – except for the guard tower, fences and razor wire, that is.

On June 14, Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution held a family barbeque in the multi-purpose building and west yard. From 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., more than 400 people attended the

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event; 180 were facility residents.

Family and friends of incarcerated people paid hundreds of dollars in travel expenses to enjoy barbecued food, outdoor games, live music and freedom of movement not normally available during regular visitations.

Normalization and The Oregon Way

Physical contact is limited during regular visitation to reduce inappropriate conduct and the passing of contraband. Family and friends are limited to a brief hug and kiss at the beginning and end. In addition, facility residents and visitors must sit in designated chairs and keep their hands above the table in plain view.

In the case of special events like a family barbecue, however, most restrictions are lifted. In fact, the only regulations noticeable are to avoid restricted areas and to keep contact with spouses family-friendly.

“It’s not specifically The Oregon Way, but it’s like that,” said Assistant Superintendent of Special Housing Bryan Clark. “It’s about normalizing and humanizing.”

The Oregon Way Clark referred to is the state’s effort to imitate the Norwegian prison system. In the 1990s, their country experienced similar recidivism rates to the United States – approximately 70% of offenders returned to prison within two years. Norway im-

plemented reforms which made prison less about punishment and more about treatment and rehabilitation, and as a result their recidivism rates eventually dropped to 20%.

Clark believes hosting family events work towards The Oregon Way, and by treating adults in custody like people, recidivism can be reduced.

“It’s like the car show we did a month ago and other upcoming family events,” Clark said. “If we can come in and do something towards normalizing, we will.”

At the family barbecue visitors and residents played games such as cornhole, ladder ball and frisbee; enjoyed popcorn, cotton candy and snow cones;



Jeremy Adams, a trainer for EOCI’s service dog training program, brings a canine to greet his sister and niece during the June 14, 2025 family picnic on the west yard.

listened to live music played by the facilities in house band, which is made up of incarcerated musicians; and there was even a pirate ship bounce house for children.

Facility resident and event worker Myron Moore said, “It’s just so normal. It’s just nice, it’s like a big family barbeque ... it makes you forget about [prison] for the time being.”

“You get to see the kids running around like a family event,” said resident Richard Hibbert, whose family traveled from Eugene. “You forget you’re locked up for an afternoon.”

Many visitors said they were pleased with the freedom this event afforded compared to normal visitation.

“You forget you’re locked up for an afternoon.”

- Richard Hibbert

During regular visits, visitors only interact with the person they are at the facility to see. That is not the case for family events, where all visitors and residents may interact with each other.

“I really like the fact that you can intermingle with everyone,” said Pamela Clark, visitor of Nickolas Vega. “It’s nothing like regular visitation.”

The Hidden Cost of Connection

While the opinion of event attendees was overwhelmingly positive, there were some drawbacks for visitors – financial costs.

Jackie Leonard, mother of resident Jacob Harper-Leonard, said, “From [my house] to Pendleton, it’s about 356 miles ... When I come for a visit and spend two nights, the trip costs \$350 with gas and staying at Motel 6. If I spend one night, it’s about \$250.”

Multiple people at this event were asked how much their trip cost them, which they reported to be between \$250 to \$400 for fuel and lodging. One person said they paid \$2,500 for a

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Dan Gajhabuka embraces his sister Dative while siblings Aline and Clemance look on in the west yard during the June 14, 2025 family picnic.



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plane ticket to fly from Australia.

In addition to upfront costs, many people took time off work to travel a day or more prior to the event, using up paid leave time or giving up work hours.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, 63.1% of incarcerated people in the United States are over 100 miles away from their families. Due to great distances and travel expenses, almost 70% of people in prison do not receive monthly visits, research shows.

However, people like Leonard are visiting monthly. Depending on fuel prices and hotel rates, she will likely spend more than \$3,000 each year to visit her son.

Assistant Superintendent of Special Housing Bryan Clark said he had occa-

sionally heard from families about the high costs of travel in general, but those conversations were sporadic. However, after learning about how much families are paying to attend a visit, Clark said EOCI administration would discuss the matter.

“Somebody told me that some hotels offered discounted rates for visitors of people at the prison, but I haven’t had any direct conversations with any of the [lodging owners],” said Clark. “We’ll definitely add this to our list of things to discuss in our debrief after the event ... all we can do is ask – the hotels have to agree or think about it.”

Wildfires Force Detours

Aside from travel expenses, sometimes forces of nature add their own costs. Prior to the barbeque, wildfires

had sprung up along Interstate 84.

According to a report by U.S. News, the Wasco County Sheriff’s Office stated residents of more than 700 homes were evacuated from northwest of The Dalles and the fire forced a closure of Interstate 84.

“They’re still dealing with one fire on 84 and one on highway 30,” said Leonard. “It added somewhere between 30 and 50 extra miles to this trip.”

Visitor Doreatha Ellis, who came to visit resident and library clerk Michael Giroux, was also impacted by the wildfires.

“The fire had shut down interstate 84, so we weren’t willing to risk it,” Ellis, who traveled from Wilsonville, said. “We had to go farther around, turning a three-and-a-half hour drive into a six-hour drive.”



In a candid moment, Gerry Cunningham dances with his daughter at the EOCI family event on June 14, 2025.

Photo by Phillip Luna/The Echo



Photo by Phillip Luna/The Echo

Augustine Lara-Lopez, right, eats with his son and his wife at the June family event. Correctional staff and incarcerated workers barbequed burgers and bratwursts for the event.

Despite costs and travel complications, she said she was happy to participate in the barbeque and hoped events would be offered more often.

"I like these kinds of visits," said Ellis. "It makes it better because it's all day and makes it even more worth the drive."

Visitor Kenneth Clark, who was visiting resident Nickolas Vega, said, "The whole event was really good. They've got music, popcorn, snow cones – it's really cool and was very worth the trip."

A Pleasant Disruption to Routine

Family barbeques are atypical of day-to-day prison life. Prisons in the United States are designed like fortresses, intended to contain people and control movement.

Events such as the barbeque disrupt normal routines.

"It makes security a little nervous,

and I get it," Clark said. "I mean, when do you have this many visitors in the facility? It's only at these events."

However, since the family barbeque

"Providing opportunities for laid-back interaction and relaxation is good. It's about family."

- Bryan Clark, Asst. Superintendant of Special Housing

has been a success for the institution, residents and visitors, Clark said they will continue and, hopefully, increase in frequency.

"There are concerns because it's not what we do in our normal routine, and [these events] take us out of that," Clark said.

"But providing opportunities for laid-back interaction and relaxation is good. It's about family."

EOCI's next family barbeque is scheduled for Aug 23. | **ECHO**



Photo by Phillip Luna/The Echo

Visitors at the family event line the track of the west yard as they wait to exit. The barbeque ended at 2 p.m.

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**Memorable Moments from the
June 14, 2025 Family Barbeque**

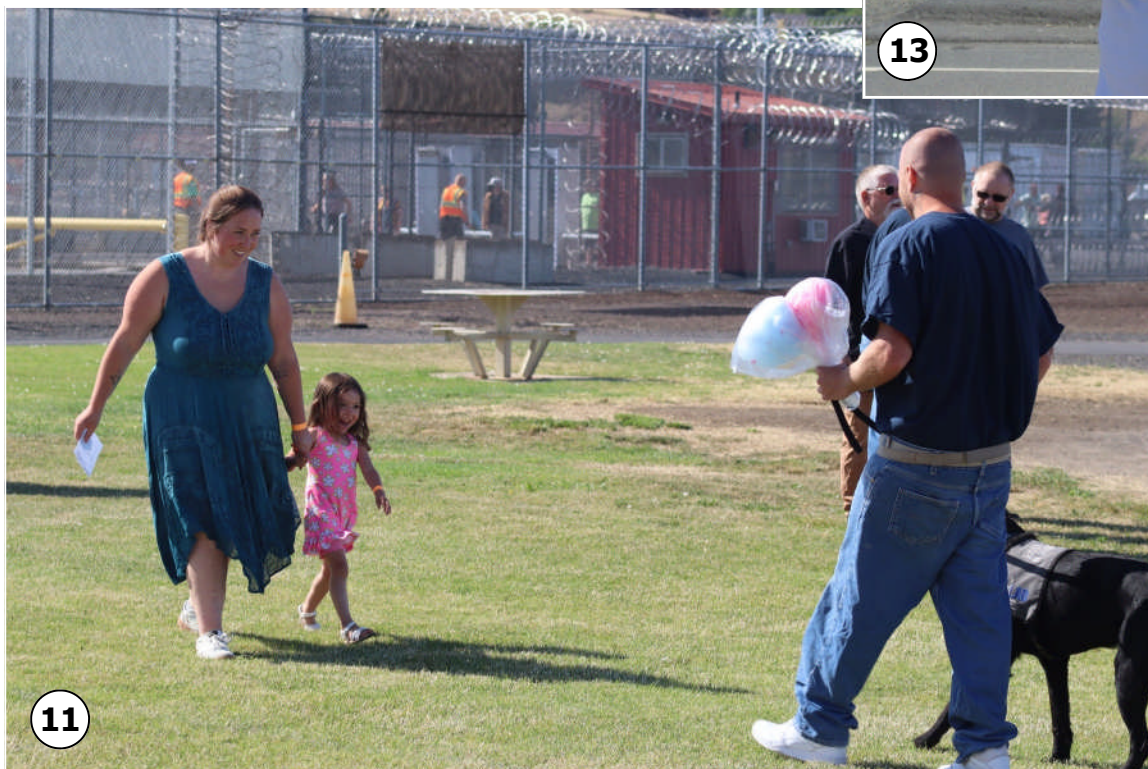
1. Oscar Zurita embraces his brother at the start of the event.
2. The house band performs in the music room, but guests can hear the music in the west yard over loud speakers.
3. Ryan Huebner hugs family member.
4. Kevin Simonsen talks with his folks on the west yard.
5. Augustine Lara-Lopez poses for a photo with his son and wife. Lara-Lopez had not seen his son in 11 years prior to the event.
6. Staff and adult in custody workers pose for a photo.
7. Benjamin Jones embraces his tired daughter in this special moment. "She has never fallen asleep in my arms before," said Jones.
8. Joel Alfaro and Maycos Xiap made popcorn for event attendees.
9. Recreation Specialists Hall and Templin check residents in for the family barbeque.



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Memorable Moments from the June 14, 2025 Family Barbeque

10. Fredy Diaz hugs his son.
11. Jeremy Adams, not one to arrive empty-handed, greets his sister and niece with bags of cotton candy and a JLAD dog.
12. Travis Freniere takes some time to enjoy a game of Jenga with Sgt. Reddick before the event ended.
13. Carmen Escamilla poses with his nephew who came from Portland to visit him.
14. Brian Depriest hugs a friend's mom at the end of the event.
15. Trevor Trollope poses with his girlfriend, April Hawkins, who traveled eight hours to see him.
16. Gerry Cunningham runs on the track with his child.
17. Chris Ainsworth poses with his mom and stepfather, who he hasn't seen in almost three years.

BUY A PHOTO

The Echo photographers take hundreds of candid photos at EOCI's family events. Residents who attended the event can review and purchase photos by contacting the Recreation Department.