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FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2017 ■ NAPLESNEWS.COM

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JOY

Volunteers bring cheer to moms, kids in shelter



Alexi C. Cardona
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

In Berta's world, women are supposed to stay quiet about domestic violence and abuse.

The day she decided to call the police on her husband, the help came with a price. Her family criticized and rejected her. Her ex-husband's family threatened her, she said. She left her home with her daughter and

ended up at the Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Collier County.

Because she spoke up, Berta and her 6-year-old can have the stable, peaceful life they wanted.

"It was difficult to make that choice, leave everything behind and have to start a new life," Berta said in Spanish. "But it was for the best."

When she and her daughter first arrived, they spent some time in the

See SHELTER, Page 4A

Volunteers Noreen Schumann, right, and Jeanette Braun wrap Christmas gifts for residents at the Shelter for Abused Women & Children on Monday.

DOROTHY EDWARDS/
NAPLES DAILY NEWS

DEP sees progress at Everglades City plant, delays suit

Greg Stanley
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has agreed to stay its lawsuit against Everglades City for 120 days over chronic sewage problems at the city's treatment plant, in a sign the two sides could soon reach a settlement.

Everglades City has hired a vendor, Veolia Environmental Services, to operate its plant after years of faulty maintenance, lapsed permits and missed deadlines caused the DEP to file suit, seeking potentially crippling fines.

The lawsuit sparked a recall petition against longtime Mayor Sammy Hamilton Jr., who resigned before the petition was submitted to the supervisor of elections.

With an experienced operator now in charge of the plant, lawyers with the DEP told a judge that they are hopeful they can come to terms with the city on both short- and long-term fixes to the plant.

"It is a positive step toward bringing the water and sewer plants into compliance," they wrote in a motion to stop litigation against the city for 120 days.

The DEP allowed Everglades City to hook six new homes up to the water and wastewater system, something the city has been barred from doing for months.

"We're just doing what we're supposed to do," said Mayor Howie

See SEWAGE, Page 4A

New law could lower grad rates

Those who left for private schools deemed dropouts

Andrew Atterbury
Treasure Coast Newspapers
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

One sentence in a new state law could drag down graduation rates across the state.

School districts are expecting lower graduation numbers for the Class of 2017

after learning students who left for some private schools no longer will be counted as graduates.

They will be dropouts.

Lawmakers included the new rule in a massive education bill in the spring after a Department of Education investigation

See GRADUATES, Page 4A



About 450 graduates were honored May 19 during commencement at Sebastian River High School on the central east coast of Florida.

LEAH VOSS/
TCPALM

Offshore oil inspections study

Trump administration halts the review called for after 2010 spill in the Gulf. 4A

How tax bill will affect families

Baffled by the GOP's tax overhaul? Here are some things to know. 16A

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RANDALL MITCHELL CUSTOM HOMES

Trump administration halts study of offshore oil inspections

Michael Virtanen
ASSOCIATED PRESS



The Trump administration has halted an independent scientific study of offshore oil inspections by the federal safety agency created after the 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

ERIC GAY, FILE/AP

The Trump administration has halted an independent scientific study of offshore oil inspections by the federal safety agency created after the 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine was told to cease review of the inspection program conducted by the federal Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement. Established following the massive BP spill, the bureau was assigned the role of improving offshore safety inspections and federal oversight.

The order marks the second time in four months that the Trump administration has halted a study by the National Academies. In August, the Interior Department suspended a National Academies study of potential health

risks for people living near Appalachian surface coal mines.

Part of the Interior Department, the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement is also tasked with improving offshore drilling environmental protections. It was established in 2011 to

separate enforcement of offshore drilling from federal revenue collection and permitting to avoid possible dysfunction and conflicts in enforcement against violations.

Bureau spokesman Greg Julian said Thursday the study may be duplicating

other work.

The Dec. 7 bureau letter ordering the suspension of all work under the contract said that within 90 days the department would decide whether to lift the order or terminate the study altogether.

“The National Academies are grateful to the committee members for their service and disappointed that their important study has been stopped,” spokesman William Kearney said Thursday.

The committee of scientists examining the inspection program held its only meeting in late October in Washington, D.C., Kearney said. Future meetings planned for the Gulf region have been put on hold.

The explosion of the Deepwater Horizon platform in April 2010 killed 11 people at a BP oil well site about 40 miles off Louisiana’s coast.

Shelter

Continued from Page 1A

emergency shelter before being admitted to the organization’s Transitional Living Program and moving into a cottage near the shelter campus, where they have been living for about three months.

With the support she has received from the staff, Berta enrolled in English-language courses, found a part-time job and bought a car.

The shelter also is giving her daughter the kind of Christmas she never had at home.

“We’d celebrate Christmas, but it was always tarnished by sadness,” Berta said.

Every family staying in transitional living cottages gets a decorated Christmas tree. Kids and parents are asked to make wish lists for Christmas gifts.

Shelter volunteers work year-round on their Christmas drive. They partner with local businesses and individuals to sponsor “Giving Trees” and give Christmas presents to families.

Volunteers gather hundreds of donated gifts and set up shop in a room inside the shelter that could rival San-

ta’s workshop.

The gifts aren’t just for families staying in the emergency shelter. Families in transitional housing and those who participate in the shelter outreach programs at the main campus and the Immokalee outreach office also receive gifts.

On Christmas morning, hundreds of shelter participants and their children will have a big breakfast, meet Santa and open gifts.

“A lot of families usually come here without a planned exit,” said Tami Welford, the shelter’s development and volunteer manager. “We do everything we can to make sure they have a home away from home, security and a merry Christmas.”

Lois Castronova and Maxine Robbins have volunteered in the shelter’s holiday operations for the past 11 years and have been in charge the last three years.

They call themselves the “Head Elves.” The two delight in finding the perfect gifts for kids and their moms.

“A lot of women come here with nothing,” Robbins said. “They’ll ask for things they need, but we like to give them something they want. Something to make them feel special — perfume, a purse, some makeup.”

“It may be the only time they can express something they want instead of putting their kids’ needs first,” Castronova said.

Kids will ask for toys ranging from basketballs to bicycles. When they arrive at the shelter, many of the moms ask for self-improvement books.

“They’re here to heal,” Castronova said. “They get here and they’re safe, and they realize they can be themselves again.”

Maria kept giving her abusive relationship a chance because she wanted a family.

“I also felt fear of never finding true love,” Maria said. “Fear of getting old and being alone.”

A mother to three children, she knew she had to leave when one of her daughters called 911 after seeing her father lay his hands on Maria. Her kids were taken from her that day and sent to live with other relatives, she said.

“It felt like my world crumbled that day,” Maria said.

She got her kids back after about three months, she said, and now the four of them live in another one of the transitional housing cottages.

Maria works full-time and attends therapy sessions at the shelter, which she said helps her “think about not

making the same mistakes.”

Maria and Berta said they felt lost while experiencing the abuse, but now they feel grounded in having an army of people supporting and encouraging them to stand on their own two feet and make better lives for themselves and their children.

“It took a great deal of courage for them to leave those situations,” said Carol Roldan, the women’s transitional living program advocate. “They’re motivated, courageous and faithful. They cut the thread of their fear and are stronger for it.”

Their faith, gratitude and the friendships they’ve formed at the shelter have helped them get through tough times. They encourage anyone in an abusive relationship to ask for help.

“One of my biggest lessons was that just because it’s hard, it’s not impossible,” Maria said. “Keep faith in God, or whoever you put your faith in. It might look rainy now, but the sun will come out.”

If you are in an abusive relationship and need help, call 911 or the Shelter for Abused Women and Children’s 24-hour crisis line at 239-775-1101.

Editor’s note: To protect shelter residents and their children, their names have been changed in this story.

Sewage

Continued from Page 1A

Grimm. “We’re doing regular maintenance and making sure things work properly.

“Basically, this company is making sure we’re operating what we have to its fullest potential,” Grimm said.

“We still need a new plant, but that will come.”

DEP inspectors caught the city’s wastewater treatment plant pumping raw sewage into nearby mangroves in 2015.

The city also had failed to complete dozens of needed temporary repairs to the plant, as well as move forward with a complete reconstruction of it under deadlines outlined in the settlement of a prior lawsuit with the DEP.

In February, the DEP asked the judge to force the city to give up control of both its wastewater treatment plant and drinking water plant after inspectors found a critical pump at the city’s drinking water facility was leaking and in need of repairs while the plant’s only backup was broken and unusable.

Had the leaking pump stopped working, water would have been shut off to the 955 homes and businesses connected to the utility, the DEP warned.

Both pumps since have been replaced by the city.

Collier County has agreed to help the city administratively to run the plant and seek grant money to pay for repairs and eventually a complete reconstruction of the plant.

The county also has agreed to step in to run the plant in the case of an emergency or if Veolia fails to perform.

Graduates

Continued from Page 1A

into whether districts boosted graduation rates by funneling students who can’t pass state tests to alternative schools.

Many educators say the rule hurts schools trying to help students who struggle with the traditional graduation route.

“This was always about helping students graduate, not about hiding at-risk kids,” said Brian McMahon, a performance-data analyst with Indian River County school district.

Florida districts for years have partnered with alternative schools such as Smart Horizons Career Online Education, a popular online high school.

Martin County, for instance, signed its first contract with Smart Horizons in 2014, and since then, 100 of its students graduated from the school, according to district officials.

Through Smart Horizons and other similar schools, students can earn diplomas without passing state exams such as Algebra I and language arts, which are required for graduation.

These students still counted as graduates from their respective districts.

Not more.

One line in House Bill 7069 — sweeping and controversial legislation covering several facets of education from funding to expanded charter-school programs — changed how these students are reported to the state.

Public-school districts now are required to include students who transfer to private schools in graduation rates if the district has a contract with that school.

Some districts, such as Duval and Collier counties, have no contracts with private schools so are unaffected by the change, according to school officials.

Others, however, such as Leon and St. Lucie counties, are bracing for the new rule to negatively affect graduation rates, as calculated by the state.

In Martin County, 45 students graduated from Smart Horizons in 2016-17, according to school officials. This alone could swing the district’s graduation rate by about 3 percentage points.

Indian River County also sent 45 students to Smart Horizons last year, which could lower forthcoming graduation rates by about 4 percentage points, McMahon said.

Some districts, such as Manatee County, have significantly higher transfer numbers. More than 200 Manatee seniors went to private schools in 2014-15, according to reports.

St. Lucie County’s graduation rate improved by 11 percentage points last year, and about 3 percent of that increase came from students graduating from Smart Horizons, school officials said.

A calculation including Smart Horizons students would boost the district’s graduation rate by about 2 percentage points this year, said School Board member Kathryn Hensley.

She defended the practice of sending struggling students elsewhere. It’s an alternative better than letting them drop out, she said.

“It’s irritating, and somewhat frustrating,” Hensley said of the new rule. “Especially for our school sites, because they’ve been working so diligently.”

Graduation rates typically are released to the public by the Department of Education in December. The rates are a component of school grades, along with Florida Standard Assessment test scores and other factors.

The state graduation rate in 2015-16 improved 2.8 percentage points to a 13-year high of 80.7 percent, according to the Department of Education.

School district officials say they only recently found out students transferring to private schools will be counted in 2017 graduation rates. Some districts say the state has been unclear whether the change will begin with 2016-17 or 2017-18 graduation rates.

For its part, Smart Horizons has partnerships with about 25 Florida school districts and serves about 1,000 seniors, said Howard Liebman, the school’s su-

perintendent and CEO.

Public-school superintendents have expressed concerns about the new rule, but otherwise it has no effect on the school, Liebman said.

“If school districts stopped working with us, there would be 1,000 more students out there who are high-school dropouts,” Liebman said. “You can’t expect every single student that’s a senior is going to be effective on the state assessment.”

Some districts are unsure if they will continue private-school partnerships. Others are undeterred.

“We will continue to use Smart Horizons as long as it’s helping our students,” said Jamie Adcock, spokeswoman for Martin County School District.

The Department of Education since late 2016 has been looking into districts where students transferred to a non-public school or a home-education program in the second half of their senior year, officials said.

In March, state Education Commissioner Pam Stewart expanded the inquiry statewide.

This analysis continues, and eventually will be presented to the Board of Education, state officials said.

Transferring students right before graduation is a common practice in many states, Dennis Kramer, director of the University of Florida Education Policy Research Center, told the USA TODAY NETWORK in an email.

Typically, districts do this to give students more support — or to game graduation-rate calculations, Kramer said. More often than not, districts are trying to help students, Kramer wrote.

Kramer said he believes the new rule is an attempt to increase reporting accuracy across Florida.

But the state could be better off creating a new category — a transfer rate to accompany graduation figures — instead of penalizing schools by labeling students as dropouts even though they did graduate, Kramer said.

“Counting them as the same,” he said, “does both the sending and receiving school a disservice.”