

GET READY FOR  
PEA GREEN  
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GOSPEL & GROUNDS  
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# MONTROSE DAILY PRESS

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## Volunteer posse appeals for funds after busy 2025



The posse is called upon to respond in all weather and conditions. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

By KATHARHYN HEIDELBERG  
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It was getting late during hunting season one night last year, but Mark Rackay and others with the Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse were still at work. Two hunters from Kentucky, a man and his teenage son, were lost near Cerro Summit after they were separated from their party. The work day didn't end for the posse until 4 the next morning, with a recovery that came closer to tragedy than Rackay likes to think.

"We got in as far as we could with machines. These people were able to text to 911. They were dehydrated; the kid was getting sick from dehydration. ... We had to put the afterburners on. We were supposed to lay groundwork and come back in the morning," Rackay, the posse's director and public information officer, recounted on Jan. 9, as the posse's annual fundraising letters began hitting the mail.

But word of the 13-year-old's condition meant they

could not wait.

Rackay and three others continued in, locating the pair and bringing them out on foot 1.5 miles, to a place where machinery could reach. They loaded up the duo and

would have been airlifted out of there. As far as I'm concerned, the four mem-

bers of the team that did that, they saved his life. That was a big thing," Rackay said.

**"It's difficult to drop what you're doing and run up and help somebody, but that's what the job entails."**

Mark Rackay,  
Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse



Members of the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse helped keep things as safe as possible during the July 2025 fire at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, shown here from the observation deck at the visitor during the first night of the fire. (Steve Gottlieb/Montrose County Sheriff's Posse)

drove them another 6 or so miles to waiting paramedics. "If we would not have done that, I'm sure that kid

It was one of many big missions the all-volunteer posse undertook in 2025 — perhaps the massive

wildfire that shut down Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park last July rings a bell. When the park first was closed, it was the posse that established and staffed the barricades, turning people away from the danger. When evacuations were ordered, it was the posse that patrolled the empty homes to prevent any potential property crimes, and it was the posse that coordinated letting in and out those with a legitimate reason to be in the area and its roads.

"That was kind of like all hands on deck. That was a major one for the posse. We were there a lot for that," Rackay said.

In 2025, posse members retrieved motorists whose vehicles became stuck in remote areas (the posse rescues people, not vehicles, however); helped find a missing child who had wandered away; helped search for a young man who was ultimately found dead by suicide, and aided in the recovery of the victim of a fatal ATV crash.

Attention-grabbing mis-

See FUNDS page A5

## Vista's request to move from MCSD to CSI comes back before the school board

Charter director and school district superintendent both cite 'challenges' — but for different reasons

By JEREMY MORRISON  
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Vista Charter School is looking to leave the Montrose County School District. The charter is appealing to the district to approve its move to Colorado Charter School Institute, or CSI.

According to Luke Siebert, Vista's executive director, CSI is better suited to tend to the charter's needs.

"It's more about the structure of an entity, you know?" Siebert said shortly before the Christmas holidays. "MCSD isn't suited for our success. I think that CSI, their structures, they're organized more for our success."

But it's not just about organizational structure. Siebert also said he feels like the school district generally provides unfavorable conditions for a charter school to operate. He provided an analogy to illustrate his point.

"I have a really bad analogy that we have a lot of kids that fall through the cracks in Montrose County — and we serve those

students quite well," Siebert began. "If we were to walk over that crack with CSI, I think CSI would say, 'Hey, watch out for this. There's a crack there.' I feel like with MCSD it would be, we walk over that crack and they would step over it and watch us fall through it."

The Montrose County School District Board of Education had Vista's request on its agenda for the final meeting of last year, but tabled the issue. The charter's request — for the board to approve a resolution releasing Vista — comes back to the board this week.

MCSD Superintendent Dr. Carrie Stephenson was surprised to see Vista approach the district with this request to be released to CSI. She said it seemed to come out of the blue.

"This most recent request for release? Gosh, that was just right right before the board meeting," Stephen said. "So, that was not an ongoing conversation. I did not know that that was coming."

The superintendent said

See SCHOOL page A4

## City camping ban by the numbers

After first full year of enforcements, city saw 18 convictions and spent less time and money cleaning encampments

By KYLEA HENSELER  
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Hours and taxpayer dollars devoted to cleaning up semi-permanent encampments have decreased handily since the city passed a new camping ordinance in November 2024, and staff are seeing less hazardous waste.

In 2025, just 18 convictions have been handed down for unauthorized camping, and some city staff believe the numbers

show not only that the ordinance is a success, but that the city has kept true to its intention of targeting behavior, not people.

"In retrospect," said Mayor Dave Frank, "I'm not only happy to have voted for it, but I think it has proven its value, and given our enforcement agencies the ability to proactively prevent problems."

The ordinance, which generated hours of public

See CITY page A4

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## FUNDS

FROM PAGE A1

sions like the fire response and rescues are only a part of what the posse does. There is also crime-scene control, traffic control, parade security, assisting with wildfire response in unincorporated Montrose County, and countless other tasks the organization performs, providing a vital public service while also freeing up deputies for more patrol activities.

The cost to the taxpayer? Zero. The savings to the county, which does not have to contract out for the posse's services? Extensive; estimated in excess of \$100,000 — \$200,000 per year.

The cost to the posse, though? Well, it isn't free. Rackay estimates it costs around \$40,000 per year just to keep the posse functional, especially with inflation. Although members on the East End and West End furnish their time without compensation, the posse still has to have and maintain equipment; pay for training, and take care of the overhead costs of the posse building.

That's why Montrose County residents should expect a fundraising letter from the posse, asking for donations. Although the posse will accept donations year-round, the fundraising letter is its only official solicitation.

The money will help the posse purchase equipment like a utility terrain vehicle that can accommodate four, plus cargo; a haul trailer; medical and rescue equipment.

"It's a good way to give back to the community," East End Posse President Shaun Veatch said, of his decision to donate his time to the organization. Veatch grew up in Delta County, loves the outdoors, and



Posse members haul out two lost hunters near Cerro Summit in 2025. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

has a background in law enforcement — but the posse welcomes all comers if they can offer the time commitment and one skill or another. Computer specialists, those who know first aid, and those who are avid hunters and anglers are among the posse's members. "There's no one set thing. Everyone brings something to the table," as Veatch noted.

"We do everything from traffic control for the parades, to security at some of the events, to the actual search and rescue, which is the smaller part of what we do. We're there for a common purpose. Everybody wants to be helpful and participate. One person might not be able to go out on a call, but they can stay in the office and help with communications. We want people to excel at what they're good at. If

you're not comfortable with something, we're not going to make you do it," Veatch said.

"Having that range of different experiences is such a benefit to us. Because where I excel might not be what we need, and I'll need to follow somebody else's lead."

The posse counts among its members Montrose County Coroner Rick Fellebaum and Commissioner Kirstin Copeland. Or, perhaps more accurately, the board of commissioners now includes a posse member: Copeland has served on the posse for a number of years, and only recently became commissioner.

She stayed on board with the posse, because it is independent of county government, and is driven by needs and service. "It's something I'm really

passionate about. I'm a foot soldier there," said Copeland, who was a sworn peace officer as part of her duties when she was manager of Ridgway State Park.

The posse's spectrum of service is vast, and commitment is critical. "You have to be really willing to show up for calls," Copeland said, adding, however, that no single person has to be available for every call that might come. Several posse members work full-time and have other commitments — that's why there are several members and why the organization cross-trains volunteers.

"You can go a long time without an emergency call. That ebbs and flows so much, we need to have enough members to do that. You have to have duplication in leadership and the frontline. We have a lot



Posse members routinely assist in parades, traffic control, and crime scene monitoring. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff's Posse)

of talented people throughout the ranks and that makes it so everyone can still do their work lives and personal lives as they need to," Copeland said, hailing the dedication of both the Montrose-based East End posse and the West End posse.

Before she joined the posse herself, Copeland had only a superficial understanding of what it does. "It really is a very broad spectrum of community service. . . . You have to love being outside, though. Which is easy for me," said Copeland.

"It's a commitment in time to train. You have to train, have to make sure you're schooled," Rackay said, adding that posse members train together when possible for the sake of cohesion once they are called out. Rackay said that takes time to build, and that some folks may start out excited, only to fade out once reality hits. "It's difficult to drop what you're doing and run up and help somebody, but that's what the job entails," he said.

"We're on call for whatever the sheriff's office needs. We have a tremendous relationship with the sheriff's office. This is about as smooth as I've ever seen," Rackay said. During a sheriff's staffing

crunch, the posse pitched in with tasks that didn't require a sworn peace officer so that deputies could focus on the tasks that did.

"That's why they have us. We have a good bunch of men and women," he said, calling Copeland an outstanding member, and also acknowledged Fellebaum. "They volunteer to help. That's kind of neat. That's why anyone who wants to join the posse really has to have a passion for what we do," Rackay said.

Posse members like Copeland, Veatch, Fellebaum and Rackay contributed thousands of hours of work to public safety last year. Now is the community's chance to contribute a few dollars in support of the posse's work. People can mail a donation in response to the fundraising letter to the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse, P.O. Box 717, Montrose, CO 81402. Donations may also be made online at <https://www.mcspi.org/> "We're just trying to help out," said Veatch. "It's a great organization. Their sole purpose is to help the community. Everybody there understands that and is devoted to that purpose."

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## County denies inmate's excessive force suit as 'groundless'

By KATHARHYN HEIDELBERG  
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A former inmate's lawsuit alleging excessive force is without merit and should be dismissed, an attorney representing Montrose County said in a recent response to the action brought by Justin McNeil last year.

McNeil last October sued the county, Sheriff Gene Lillard, along with Deputies Michael Taylor and Danny Lewis, alleging that in the summer of 2024, he was denied the use of a wheelchair, despite having been shot in an unrelated matter. The injuries to his back and pelvic area caused him to ask for a wheelchair as he was being escorted to a visit

with his attorney.

Taylor is alleged to have mocked McNeil, telling him that if he was "so gangster," he should just walk. McNeil further alleged that Taylor slammed him against a wall and punched him while Lewis allegedly stood by and did nothing. McNeil's complaint alleges that his civil rights were violated by the conduct and by Lillard's alleged failure to properly train or discipline the deputies.

McNeil is seeking compensatory and punitive damages.

In its Jan. 2 response, the county denies allegations that McNeil specifically said he'd been shot in the lower back and pelvic area; that

Taylor ridiculed or assaulted him, and that Lewis failed to act. McNeil did not appear to need a wheelchair, the response said. The county further denies that the deputies retaliated against McNeil for his speech, and also denies that the sheriff's office, through custom and practice, failed to discipline either deputy. The county broadly denies all claims, including that the county has a "custom and practice" of using excessive force.

As part of McNeil's suit, he through his attorneys pointed to an alleged 2017 incident in which a sergeant is said to have struck an inmate in the face with the K9's chain and sicced the animal on him. Lillard was

not sheriff at that time, and the named officer no longer works for the MCSO.

After McNeil's complaint was filed, the Daily Press located a federal lawsuit brought by the inmate in the 2017 matter. It was dismissed with prejudice and the 2022 dismissal order states "any and all claims or matters in controversy with respect to plaintiff and defendant are to be dismissed. All such matters have been settled."

The county in its response to McNeil's suit denied his remaining claims in turn: Taylor and Lewis did not retaliate against McNeil, and the county did not violate the Americans With Disabilities Act, the

document states.

Montrose County argues that McNeil has not made a single valid claim for which the relief he seeks can be granted. Further, Taylor and Lewis are covered by qualified immunity if they are even properly sued in the first place "inasmuch as their actions did not violate the constitutional rights of plaintiff, did not violate clearly established law at the time of the events at issue, and were undertaken with a good faith belief in the lawfulness of their actions." McNeil has not sufficiently alleged, and can't establish, that any injury he suffered was the result of anything the defendants did in their

official capacity; he has not alleged a custom or policy that caused the deprivation of rights he alleges, the county argues.

"Plaintiff's injuries, damages and losses, if any, were the result of (his) own negligent, intentional and/or unlawful conduct," and that bars the liability of the county, the response continues.

"Plaintiff's claims are substantially frivolous and groundless," defense attorney David M. Goddard wrote in the response, asking for the county to be awarded fees and costs.

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## Man accused of sexual, physical abuse

By KATHARHYN HEIDELBERG  
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A Montrose man accused of sexually assaulting children in his care denied the allegations, telling police that he only shows appropriate affection to the children, and that they may have once walked in on him while he was showering.

Antonio Aviles was arrested Dec. 31 on suspicion of felony-3 sexual assault on a child by one in a position of trust, an aggravated sex crime, and misdemeanor child abuse. He was held on a \$25,000 cash-only bond. Formal charges are due by Jan. 15.

One or more of four children disclosed to their godparents that Aviles physically and sexually abused them, an arrest affidavit prepared by Montrose Police Officer Bridget Clarkson says.

According to Clarkson's summa-

ry, the children's godmother told another officer that the children asked to speak with her privately, so she took them outside to her car, where they disclosed. Per the affidavit, the children told their godmother Aviles had punched one of them several times out of anger, always unplugging the cameras in the home first, and later explaining away questions about that by saying they were unplugged by accident, or malfunctioning.

One of the children alleged he had touched her inappropriately while he was nude and lying in bed with her. "(Reporting party) expressed concern for the children's safety, stating the children expressed fear Antonio threatened to kill them if they disclose the abuse," the Clarkson's summation of another officer's report says.

The children were interviewed at The Dolphin House Child Ad-

vocacy Center on Dec. 29. One of them reported several times when she was physically abused, and struck with a belt. Another child was reportedly punched in the stomach and on his head. Aviles, said one of the child witnesses, would disconnect cameras in home when others who lived there were out, so he could physically abuse them. One of the children also alleged that, when they all lived in another state, a friend of Aviles' had dragged her from where she was hiding under the bed, and touching her thigh, but that Aviles did nothing to stop it.

One of the child witnesses described sexual aids and how Aviles allegedly used them on himself. Per the affidavit, she alleged that she saw a video of Aviles using the item on a child.

Another child told the interviewer he did not want to talk

because he was told "the bad stuff is only our business," the affidavit states. "When asked about the good stuff, (child) stated there is no good stuff?"

The child alleged that Aviles sexually abused him and, while naked, also sexually abused one of the other children. "(Child) reported that he has witnessed similar things happening to all four of the children 'every single time,'" the affidavit said.

The document listed additional allegations of similar conduct. One of the children was so fearful that he asked to write out what he had to say and, when the interviewer read back what he had written, the child "covered his eyes and ears."

Police interviewed Aviles on Dec. 30. He was cooperative and while he admitted to having gone through anger management classes a few years earlier, he denied

sexually abusing or otherwise harming the children.

He spoke of showing them affection through cuddling and kissing, while working with them to better understand privacy, after, he said, one of the children walked in on him in the bathroom. He would hang out with them during movie nights in his bedroom, where two liked to lie on the bed with him, however, he "denied all information related to nudity or sexual abuse involving the children." Aviles also denied having pornography or sexual aids.

Clarkson said that when she confronted Aviles with the children's allegations, he "explained they may have seen him naked in the shower."

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