More than 200 attend Idaho Falls cybersecurity conference

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https://www.postregister.com/news/local/more-than-200-attend-idaho-falls-cybersecurity-conference/article_664ec6f2-4666-11ed-a46e-3f8e96e066a2.html

The state's only cybersecurity conference took place Friday and Saturday in the **College of Eastern Idaho's Yellowstone Training Center**.

The annual conference featured many workshops and speakers, helping a sold-out crowd of over 200 people gain new knowledge and understanding of the cybersecurity world.

The conference, called BSides — Idaho Falls, is part of an international organization. BSides conferences are community driven and run by volunteers in cities across the world. Each host city runs its conference a little differently based on interest and needs in its information security community.

"It's called BSides because when everyone used to use records, the A-side of the record had all the stuff the artist knew the people would like. The experimental, kind of different stuff was all on the B-side," said Ginger Wright, one of the local organizers. "We aren't your average cybersecurity conference, we are different, experimental, new and innovative."

Several people in the Idaho Falls area got together in 2017 to start a local BSides conference because of an ever-increasing interest in information security and cybersecurity.

The conference was run by different groups in previous years, making it difficult to centralize and organize. But this year three local women — Lindsey Cerkovnik, Tiffany Keller and Wright — formed a new nonprofit, the Eastern Idaho Cyber Education Alliance, to ensure the conference can be planned, organized and executed by the same organization. Cerkovnik is the alliance president.

"There is such a big cybersecurity community in Idaho Falls thanks to the (Idaho National) laboratory and different organizations such as Department of Homeland Security and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency," Cerkovnik said. "To us it makes a lot of sense to have an organization that supports cybereducation for the community and gives a place for us all to have a local knowledge and colleague base."

Conference officials found that most of the conferences they had been to feature the same big-name speakers, large companies and overall disconnect among attendees. They wanted their conference to feel local, a place where people could feel a sense of community.

"A lot of the people we have teaching workshops and speaking have amazing things to share," said Wright, the alliance's secretary. "We wanted to take local people who wouldn't normally get a voice and put them where they could be heard."

The alliance's mission is to increase opportunities in education for cybersecurity in southeastern Idaho, Cerkovnik said. Cerkovnik has attended some of the largest cybersecurity conferences in the world and said "some of the most innovative and original ideas" she has ever heard come from the BSides conferences.

"This has been a great backbone for the conference which has become so much more popular in the community."

The conference was sold out online but people continued to show up in person and organizers worked to find them seats.

The conference had workshops on many different aspects of cybersecurity ranging from memory forensics to threat hunting. Participants both listened to and engaged with the presenters, developing an increased knowledge of cybersecurity information and technology.

Most attendees began their day learning how to pick locks, helping them to understand that even when something seems safe and secure, the point of cybersecurity is to find those spots that look safe but can be bypassed by people who shouldn't be able to do so.

The conference even hosts a "capture-the-flag" exercise leading participants on a Jeopardy-style, digitally created, 16-question quest in which the first person to bypass the firewalls created will win.

BSides, unlike other international cybersecurity organizations, prides itself on offering unique approaches to cybersecurity education and opportunities.

The Idaho Falls event is able to capitalize on its proximity to INL's Cybercore Integration Center and the local Department of Homeland Security office.

"It is quite unusual that a community this small and in a relatively isolated area has this much expertise and support in cybersecurity," said Bri Rolston, a conference volunteer.

"There is so much diversity of skill sets here and getting people in a room and seeing that has been so much fun. You see people start out talking with local industry experts here which evolve into mentorships and then into employment opportunities."

The conference nearly doubled its attendance numbers from last year and is planning on further growth in 2023.

With nearly 700,000 cybersecurity jobs open in the United States, the country needs more people to fill those positions, Wright said.

"In Idaho we often think about jobs that are either agricultural or things like nuclear science, which, let's face it, are out of reach for many of us," Wright said. "These information technology careers we are talking about, with schools like **CEI** and colleges like University of Idaho and Idaho State University, are absolutely high paying careers available to anyone in Idaho Falls. Conferences like this one can get someone started."

"I know people that came to the conference last year that are coming back this year with actual jobs in cybersecurity and they will have gotten that job within the last year."

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