

Tracing

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people who have tested positive. Contact tracers get in touch with people who have been in close contact with those who have tested positive, keep track of any symptoms and help them get what they need to quarantine.

Although an increasing number of Oregonians are getting inoculated against the virus, COVID-19 continues to spread here. As of Jan. 15, the state has designated 26 counties as “extreme risk,” including Marion and Polk.

The week of Jan. 3, 8.1% of Oregon tests for COVID-19 came back positive, according to the Oregon Health Authority. If positive testing is higher than 5%, it could be a struggle to complete contact tracing soon enough to prevent the spread of the virus, according to the World Health Organization.

Health workers from Marion, Polk and Washington counties who talked with the Statesman Journal said their job is to educate people and help them quarantine, and to limit the spread of the disease, rather than “shame and blame.”

The week of Jan. 3, health officials were able to contact 68% of people who tested positive for COVID-19, within 24 hours of identifying the case, for an initial interview.

Just about 39% of cases could be traced to a known source that week — the state’s goal is to determine the source of 70% of cases.

A spokeswoman for the state’s health agency said OHA does not have data on how many close contacts health officials are able to reach.

Tracking disease

You can infect people



Public Health-Epidemiologist Rachel Posnick poses for a portrait at Marion County Health and Human Services. Posnick has been conducting contact tracing for the last four years. Over the last several months, her focus has been tracking the spread of COVID-19. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

with COVID-19, even if you don’t exhibit any symptoms, making the disease especially difficult to contain.

Asymptomatic people might go about normal activities rather than staying put because they feel OK — and then run the risk of infecting someone else, who might have a much worse experience.

But if a case investigator can contact people who test positive, then encourage them to quarantine, that can help limit the spread of the virus.

The same goes for contact tracing, by stopping potentially-infectious contacts from going out into the community.

“Our contact tracers are checking in on people who have been exposed and making sure that they have access to the resources that they need to stay home and that they have not developed symptoms,” said Rachel Posnick, an epidemiologist who works in case investigation at Marion County Health and Human Services.

The goal is to educate people and to try to help them take measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, Posnick said.

“So that might be within their home, handwashing, staying away from people, being in their own room, things like that,”

Posnick said. “We really want to make sure that they understand what they can do personally to prevent spread.”

That can mean the county provides resources, like places to go for help with rent or buying groceries, since quarantining may require people to miss work.

But the process also can help the scientific community learn about the disease: how it manifests and progresses in individuals, and then how it spreads in the community.

“What puts people at higher risk?” Posnick said. “Who are the people that we really need to focus on that are going to have poor outcomes?”

Investigators also ask where people have been to understand in what settings they might have been exposed. Posnick said that information can help public health officials provide better guidance to protect the community.

How case investigation works

Counties get batches of test results from providers, and case investigators aim to call every person who has tested positive.

They ask about any symptoms you might be having, risk factors such as your age, and where you might have been exposed to the virus, Posnick said.

These investigators also ask about places you went while you were infectious. And they ask for demographic information including race, ethnicity and what language you speak.

The person who has tested positive provides a list of close contacts that local public health authorities also try to notify.

A close contact is defined as anyone you have been in contact with for 15 cumulative minutes in a 24-hour period, within 6 feet, during the window of time in which you were infectious, said Posnick.

Posnick gave an example: let’s say you’re a regular at a coffee shop who goes to pick up a coffee to go, a process that takes five minutes. Even if you go every day for five minutes, that wouldn’t meet the criteria of 15 minutes in one 24-hour period.

Sonia Castañeda Felix, a student at Western Oregon University, works part-time as a contact

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tracing for Polk County. A contact tracer can complete the necessary training in a week if necessary, Castañeda Felix said.

Castañeda Felix said she attended three training sessions: one provided by a national association representing public health agencies and workers, one by the state’s health agency, and training on how to use the platform the state and counties use to record data from contact tracing calls.

She says she contacts about 30 to 35 people every day.

With each person she reaches, Castañeda Felix has a longer initial conversation notifying them that they were exposed, explaining how long they need to quarantine, and seeing if they need financial help or other support to stay home.

She also does shorter daily check-ins after that initial conversation for the duration of their quarantine.

Given the recent surge in cases, the Oregon Health Authority has recommended that if counties need to streamline the contact tracing process, they should prioritize people in high-risk groups, limit interactions to one interview, and forgo the two weeks of daily monitoring.

Patient privacy a priority

Contact tracers across the country have faced difficulties reaching people.

Just about half of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center this year said they would be “comfortable or likely to engage” with all three key steps in contact tracing: Talking to a tracer, sharing information with them, and quarantining if they tested positive.

The contact tracers and case investigators interviewed by the Statesman Journal said most people they reach are receptive and helpful.

According to data maintained by the Oregon Health Authority, Marion County public health officials “initiated follow up” with 74% of people who tested positive for COVID-19 in the week of Jan. 3 for an initial interview within 24 hours of identifying the case. In Polk County, that share was 97%, and in Washington County, 36%.

The county doesn’t share information on the person who tested positive with their contacts, said Jacqui Umstead, Polk County public health administrator.

“I know some people ... they’re concerned that if they list their close contacts, that they’re going to get blamed,” Umstead said, “And it is confidential.”

If it’s a member of your household, you’ll find out pretty quickly who it is because you live with them, but “if it’s a work contact or a friend or a different close contact, that information is never revealed in the contact tracing interview,” Umstead said.

“We want people to feel as safe as possible talking to us,” said Nancy Griffith, senior program coordinator who helps oversee Washington County’s contact tracing and case investigation programs.

The process is voluntary, but public health officials urge participation.

A contact tracer will never ask for your financial information or Social Security information, said Castañeda Felix. She said she just asks for date of birth and address to confirm she is speaking with the correct person.

Surge in cases poses challenges

As of early December, Washington County was dealing with a significant surge in cases.

While they were still trying to reach every person who tested positive, they were asking those

people to notify their close contacts, “as they can likely do this before we can,” said county spokeswoman Mary Sawyers.

She said that the county focuses on “high-risk exposures in long term care facilities, adult and group homes, shelters and sober living facilities, jails, schools and daycare exposures.”

The county prioritizes contacts in those types of facilities, and she said that “as capacity allows we continue to do some contact tracing in the general population.”

Posnick, the epidemiologist in Marion County, said in December the disease investigation team had between 50 and 60 staffers — up dramatically from six people before the pandemic.

Still, the leap in cases in the two weeks after Thanksgiving had created even more demand for the county’s disease investigation team, Posnick said.

“We were doing pretty well up until the surge,” Posnick said. “I don’t know that it’s that we don’t have enough people. I think we’re just still trying to figure out how to reposition so that we can meet growing case number demands.”

Washington County has increased its disease investigation staff dramatically as well, going from a team of about eight to 10 people to about 175 people, said Sawyers.

As of early January, Polk County was in the process of hiring two case investigators and potentially one more, Umstead said.

That’s on top of the three people the county hired earlier and others who have been pulled from non-COVID duties to help with disease investigation.

“We are looking for more help there,” Umstead said. “We’re staying on top of our cases, but it’s definitely been challenging.”

Public Notices

PUBLIC NOTICE NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

Review Body: Planning Commission
Hearing Date & Time: February 9, 2021, 7:00 p.m.

Hearing Location: Teleconference meeting via Zoom with a telephone call in number. Due to HB 4212, the Planning Commission may hold public hearings by telephone, video, or through some other electronic or virtual means. The instructions to listen to or virtually attend the meeting will be included in the Planning Commission meeting agenda which will be posted on the City’s website and outside of City Hall, 306 S Water Street, on February 2, 2021. This will include a hyperlink to the meeting and a call in number to participate by telephone.

Agenda Item #1: File Number CP-21-01. Comprehensive Plan amendment to adopt the 2021 Water Master Plan as a support document to the Silverton Comprehensive Plan. The application will be reviewed following the criteria found in Silverton Development Code section 4.12.400.

Agenda Item #2: Discussion/Action. Discuss providing input to City Council on future City Council Goals

Failure of an issue to be raised in a hearing, in person or by letter, or failure to provide enough detail to afford the decision maker an opportunity to respond precludes appeal to LUBA based on that issue. Additional information and/or review of this application, including all documents and evidence submitted, may be obtained at Silverton City Hall, 306 South Water Street by telephoning Jason Gottgetreu at (503) 874-2212. Copies of the staff report will be available seven (7) days prior to the public hearing and are available for review at no cost at City Hall by appointment, a copy can be provided on request at a reasonable cost.
 Silverton Appeal January 27, 2021

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Chick-fil-A

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Tribes of the Siletz.

Company representatives filed the Area D master plan amendment on Dec. 17, just a few weeks after a Chick-fil-A Food Truck PDX began making near-weekly visits to the Salem area.

Along with its fans, the chain also has its detractors.

For years the chicken sandwich chain has faced backlash for its donations to anti-LGBTQ groups. CEO Dan Cathy once said supporting marriages of same-sex couples would



The Delafield Chick-fil-A will open Feb. 27. SUBMITTED

invite God’s judgment on the country.

In 2019, the company made changes to its char-

itable initiatives, but still receives criticism on social media.

The plans filed are only

the first exploratory step into a multi-step process toward opening a new restaurant.

If the project does move forward, a Keizer Chick-fil-A location would be the first in the Salem area and seventh in Oregon. There are currently two in Beaverton and one each in Hillsboro, Bend, Medford and Clackamas.

Emily Teel is the Food & Drink Editor at the Statesman Journal. Contact her at eteel@statesmanjournal.com, Facebook, or Twitter. See what she’s cooking and where she’s eating this week on Instagram: [@emily_teel](https://www.instagram.com/emily_teel).