

COVID-19

Continued from Page 1A

man Journal, makes no mention of COVID-19.

“COVID was never discussed with her doctors as far as how to treat or what we would expect for her end of life,” Melissa Pollman said. “I am very unsettled by how OHA tracks these statistics.”

OHA officials said they cannot comment on Haley’s death, even with the family’s permission.

What is a COVID-19 death in Oregon?

So how does Oregon define a COVID-related death?

If a resident dies of, for example, a car crash, a homicide or a fatal disease such as Batten’s and incidentally tests positive for COVID-19, are they added to the state’s COVID-19 death toll?

OHA officials declined to answer, saying they cannot address hypothetical situations.

Instead, they provided the state’s “surveillance case definition” guidelines. Surveillance is a public health term for collecting and analyzing data to track and address the spread of disease. Under the guidelines, individuals are added to the state’s COVID-19 death toll if a COVID-19 specific code is listed on their death certificate as causing or contributing to the death.

Individuals also are added if they had a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case and died of any cause within 60 days of a positive test, onset of COVID-19 symptoms or exposure to a confirmed case.

And they are added if they test positive during a hospitalization, or up to two weeks prior to hospitalization, and die of any cause while hospitalized or as long as 60 days after they are discharged.

Haley was likely added to the state’s COVID-19 death toll under the third reporting guideline.

“Having COVID-19 listed on the death certificate is not a requirement to meet the surveillance case definition for a COVID-19-related death,” Heider said.

Oregon is an outlier

Early in the pandemic, the federal government and some states, including Oregon, said they counted anyone with COVID-19 who died as a COVID-19 death, even if they died from other causes.

Those statements sparked charges that COVID-19 death totals were being inflated.

“Federal and state governments gradually altered such policies over the spring and summer to say that in order for a death to be counted as a COVID-19 death, the disease had to have played a role,” a February 2021 article from the Association of American Medical Colleges stated.

Colorado was one of the first states to make the change. In May 2020 it began separately reporting the number of people whose deaths were fully or partially caused by COVID-19, and those who had COVID-19 when they died of other causes.

Other states soon followed.

In December 2021, new guidance for states was issued by the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, in connection with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Until then, there was no standard definition for reporting COVID-19 associated deaths, meaning jurisdictions counted deaths using different methods.

Under the recommended guidance, jurisdictions should classify a death as associated COVID-19 if any of the following applies:

- The death certificate indicates COVID-19 as one of the causes of death.
- A case investigation determines COVID-19 caused or contributed to the death.
- The death occurred within 30 days of a positive test (or onset of symptoms for a probable case) and was due to natural causes. That would exclude, for example, homicides, suicides, accidents and overdoses.

This month, Massachusetts became the latest state to change how it defines deaths from COVID-19, following the new guidelines.

The state applied the new definition retroactively to the start of the pandemic and removed 4,081 deaths, or roughly 15% of its total, from its count.

“We are adopting the new definition because we support the need to standardize the way COVID-19-associated deaths are counted,” Massachusetts State Epidemiologist Dr. Catherine Brown said in a news release. “Prior to the CSTE definition, states did not have a nationally recommended definition for COVID-19 deaths and, as such, have been using a variety of processes and definitions to count their deaths.

On the West Coast, Oregon now is an outlier.

Washington revised its guidelines in July 2020. It counts only those deaths in which the cause was confirmed or suspected to have been COVID-19. If COVID-19 is later ruled out as the official cause of death, it removes those deaths from the database. Unlike Oregon, it does not count those who have tested positive for COVID-19 but died of unrelated causes.

California revised its reporting guidelines Jan. 1 to include only deaths in which COVID-19 is listed as a contributor to the cause of death on the death certificate. California’s Santa Clara County made a similar change in July 2021, reducing the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic by about 22%.

Oregon has not changed its definition of a COVID-19 death, Heider said.

The state developed its COVID-19 death surveillance definition early on in the pandemic, he said.

“At that point in time, there was not a national surveillance definition in place,” he said. “Oregon’s COVID-19 death definition has remained constant throughout the pandemic in order to consistently capture and count COVID-19 deaths in the same way over time.”

But OHA has changed the way it refers to COVID-19 deaths.

For the first 11 months of the pandemic, OHA’s daily pandemic news releases began with the number of lives “COVID-19 has claimed.”

On Jan. 12, 2021, OHA quietly changed its phrasing to the number of “COVID-related deaths.”

Oregon ranks seventh among the 50 states for the least COVID-19 deaths per capita, just behind Washington at No. 6. The two states have had similar mask mandates and other restrictions.

Unconfirmed deaths not tracked

In addition to counting a broader category of deaths than many states, Oregon also is one of the few states that doesn’t go back and update its count based on the cause of death listed on the death certificate.

Most states that report deaths “with COVID-19” later compare death certificates to surveillance data to identify those who had COVID-19 but died of an unrelated cause, and remove them from the death tally.

In Oregon, Heider said, “deaths are not removed from the tally as long as the surveillance case definition has been met.”

“Public health reviews laboratory, hospitalization and vital records information to determine if a person meets the COVID-19 death definition. All cases who meet the COVID-19 death definition are included in the death counts,” Heider said. “It’s not up to public health to determine if COVID-19 played a role in a person’s death.”

The state does not have an estimate of how many deaths it has linked to COVID-19 where the disease did not actually play a role in the death according to the death certificate.

Salem resident Josh Barnett says his mother, Theresa Malec, is one of those cases.

Malec, a Wallowa County artist, tested positive for COVID-19 on Aug. 4, but felt better after about a week, Barnett said.

Nearly four months later, on Nov. 29, she was admitted to the hospital and eventually diagnosed with liver cancer.

While there, Malec initially tested positive for COVID-19, but two subsequent tests were negative.

In early December, Barnett brought Malec to his north-

east Salem home where she died Dec. 15.

On Jan. 27, OHA reported that a 70-year-old Wallowa County woman had tested positive on Aug. 4 and died Dec. 15.

Although OHA doesn’t use names in its reports, it’s unlikely to be anyone else in the tiny county of about 7,000 residents, Barnett said.

“They won’t confirm that it’s her,” he said. “But unless there was another 70-year-old woman that had COVID in August and died Dec. 15, that’s her.”

Because of the four-month gap between the initial positive test and the date of death for the woman in OHA’s tally, her death certificate would need to list COVID-19 as contributing to or causing the death, according to OHA guidelines.

Malec’s death certificate, which Barnett shared with the Statesman Journal, lists her cause of death as liver cancer. It notes her two negative COVID tests.

“I don’t know how many people have fallen under this whole deal,” Barnett said. “It seems very deceptive.”

Heider said OHA cannot comment on specific deaths.

A Batten warrior

Oregon’s COVID-19 restrictions, among the toughest in the nation, were hard on Haley.

Batten disease attacks the brain and nervous system, causing vision loss, seizures, language loss, dementia, hallucinations and more.

During the pandemic, everything that had kept Haley’s dying brain stimulated was shut down. There was no music therapy, horse therapy, physical therapy or speech therapy. There was no school and no socializing.

Melissa Pollman is convinced that sped up Haley’s decline.

“When you have a brain that’s atrophying, when you lose it, it doesn’t come back,” she said. “In our minds, we thought we had maybe three more years.”

She’s angry. Oregon used spikes in its COVID-19 death counts to justify shutdowns and restrictions. And those counts may have been inaccurate, she said.

“There’s no accountability for all of the loss and consequences that came out of the actions the state took,” she said.

Gov. Kate Brown cited Oregon’s COVID-19 death toll as she extended her COVID-19 state of emergency in both December 2020 and February 2021.

“We continue to lose too many Oregonians to this deadly disease, including over 100 reported deaths in the last two days,” Brown said on Dec. 17, 2020.

The family is upset, too, that just a few days after Haley was laid to rest at Belcrest Memorial Park in Salem, their “Batten warrior” became known instead as Oregon’s fifth COVID-19 death in a child.

Haley was diagnosed with Batten disease in 2017, after seeing a round of doctors for her declining eyesight.

But she didn’t let her health challenges stop her from doing anything she wanted, her father, Dean Pollman said.

Even when she couldn’t see, she insisted on skiing and wakeboarding. When she began having delusions, she gave her monsters names and made up stories about them.

“She was a total inspiration to me,” Dean Pollman, said. “She just took it in stride.”

Meanwhile, Dean and Melissa set out to learn everything they could about Batten disease, and to search for treatments.

They founded the Haley’s Heroes foundation, which has raised more than \$1 million for promising research into prolonging the lives of children with Batten disease.

“Our goal in starting it was to save Haley,” Melissa Pollman said. “I think we realized pretty early we wouldn’t be able to.”

Instead, they decided to focus on the quality, not quantity, of Haley’s life.

Haley lived life fearlessly and tenaciously, her parents said.

“There wasn’t a day that Haley didn’t have fun,” her brother Cole said. “Everyone knew Haley. She was a rock star.”

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Layton

Continued from Page 1A

In preparation for New York, he trained hard, partaking in “throw-downs,” which are essentially the latte competitions but scaled down to primarily local folks, getting advice from others and simply making more latte art.

While competing in New York, Layton said, he didn’t really recall where his head was, other than focusing on what was in his cup. When competing, he just “blacks out.”

“When you submit a pour, you get a photo of it, then you bring it over to the judges’ table - and I really don’t know what happens all before that, or even to be able to make a beautiful latte in a cup,” Layton said, laughing. “But while I’m there rewatching the footage, I’m just right there - in the moment, with my cup - and I didn’t notice any of them. In my mind, it’s just me and the cup.”

Though Layton didn’t formally win anything as he placed in the top 16, he’s already thinking ahead to how he can get to the next latte art competitions later in the year. The next Coffee Fest is in June, in Chicago.

“I’m gonna try my best to go to all of them,” Layton said. “But we’ll see.”

Taking a shot

Fascinated by coffee since a friend showed him a photo of latte art a decade ago, Layton said he got a funny feeling about wanting to do it, feeling it was “the one thing for me.”

“Albeit a bit strange and unique, since then I’ve been addicted to pouring beautiful drinks,” Layton said, pausing as he delicately tipped his pitcher of milk over a mug of coffee, the movements deft and indicative of much practice. Once the mug was full, he put it on the counter, revealing a beautiful rosette atop the latte.

He originally moved to Salem to attend Chemeketa Community College in 2014 while working in the foster care system.



Isaac’s Barista Kyle Layton pours a swan latte design. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

He said his personal philosophy has always been “centered on serving people and having solid community,” and his interest in coffee stemmed from wanting to serve his friends and roommates really good coffee.

He bought a Mr. Coffee espresso machine, which was a hefty investment for his perceived simple hobby at the time, and started making his own syrups since he loved flavored creations. His love of

food and drink comes from his father being a cook and caterer, who instilled in him a “developed palate.”

“There’s something fun to me about serving someone a drink where my creative hand was part of every step,” Layton said. “Even up to the drink being consumed.”

Layton even started buying unroasted coffee, roasting it in his popcorn maker, from which he actually got some “pretty

good tasting coffees.” His friends, after being served this “labor of love” from Layton and seeing his very obvious love of the craft, encouraged him to be a barista.

His transition to coffee was solidified in part because of being burned out by working in foster care, which he did for three years. Once he was applying to coffee shops, his first call back was for IKE Box Café, which he felt drawn to in how they supported the community, particularly youth.

When Layton got word he secured the job, he’s stuck with them ever since.

A lot for a latte

Being at IKE Box Café, Layton eventually rose through the ranks in his two years to become inventory specialist, which meant ordering and shopping for ingredients and supplies. He even brought one of his homemade syrups, then was introducing them to the café.

You may recognize one of his earliest creations: brown sugar bourbon syrup. It’s now one of the top-served drinks.

“I love that drink so much because as a drink creator, something you become comfortable with is that you’ll never create a drink that everyone loves,” Layton said, chuckling. “But that drink specifically has been the closest I have gotten to almost loved by everyone who’s tried it.”

At Isaac’s, he’s been the lead barista and educator. He puts together the seasonal menu, creates drinks and teaches the new hires how to make drinks.

“This entire time I’ve been at the company, they’ve been helping me improve and become more well-rounded every step of the way, for me to pursue my dreams,” Layton said. “I’m pursuing latte art competitively right now, but at the end of the day I want my own café and run my own coffee shop, they’re helping me reach that goal.”

Though Layton said he’s far from being able to get his own place now, you can keep up with his latte art creations by stopping by Isaac’s Downtown or following him on Instagram, @barista_kylelayton.