



Photo by The Oregonian

New details of the state's deal with Quest Diagnostics show Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and her top political aide provided misleading information to the public last month about COVID-19 tests, according to records obtained by The Oregonian/OregonLive.

OUR VIEW

Mistakes erode the public's trust

G ov. Kate Brown announced on March 18 the state had a deal with a private laboratory to do 20,000 COVID-19 tests.

In early days of the state's pandemic response, it was a very reassuring declaration that the state could tap into private testing to reveal the scope of the virus.

"It's critical for us to increase our capacity so that we can fully assess the spread of COVID-19 in Oregon," Brown said.

But the deal turns out to be about half true. The state is only going to get about half the tests. No contract had been signed when the announcement was made. And the state does not plan to put the tests into immediate use to test more Oregonians.

We don't believe Brown intentionally misled anyone. Nik Blosser, the governor's chief of staff, told *The Oregonian* it was his fault and apologized for the misinformation provided to the governor to announce.

The state was working on a deal. He explained he was confused about how testing works and rushed to release information without confirming it.

The state actually did not sign the contract with the provider, Quest Diagnostics, until two weeks after Brown's announcement. It is for up to \$690,000 at \$69 a test. And the state is not planning to use them right now. It will hold on to them and use them later — perhaps when some social distancing requirements are lifted and there is a new surge.

How is it that we know Brown's announcement was wrong?

We know because journalists at The Oregonian asked questions and used Oregon's public records law to hold government accountable. Reporters looked for a copy of the contract in a state database.

It wasn't there. They asked for a copy of the contract.

It wasn't provided until a week later. And it turned out the deal was smaller than had been announced — 10,000 tests, not 20,000 — and had not even been signed until April 1.

In a crisis or under tight deadlines, people do sometimes not act carefully. It's human nature.

But it's vital Oregonians can trust what Brown says the state is doing about COVID-19. She can't allow the public's faith in the government's response to erode.

MY VOICE

Open letter to the community from Grande Ronde Hospital

In spite of the uncertainty the novel coronavirus has caused for countries, businesses and families, the outpouring of humanity from the community we have the privilege to serve has been humbling and inspiring to all of us at Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics. It has meant more than I can possibly express. First, let me reassure you that GRH is on solid financial footing. I know it can be hard to read the headlines that some rural hospitals across the nation, already vulnerable to closure, may not survive this pandemic. Thanks to years of good financial stewardship and loyal local support, GRH entered into this crisis in a strong position. We will not, however, emerge unscathed.

As many of our peers have also reported, we are experiencing a significant reduction in volumes. We have also seen a substantial increase in costs associated with COVID-19 preparedness. Compared to previous financial benchmark periods our revenue is down over one-third. Our responsibility to both our organization and to the community we serve is a balance we must carefully navigate as we face reduced revenue and increased costs. By not taking meaningful action now, our ability to continue serving our community from a position of strength and independence will be jeopardized.

So, let me share with you what we have already done.

First, the current economic reality we face was shared with our employees in early April. I am both proud and humbled to report that many have already generously offered



About the Author
Jeremy Davis is president and CEO of Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics, La Grande.

to temporarily reduce their pay or hours to help us through this. In addition, our leadership team, both managers and administrators, developed an expense reduction plan to help combat the effects of declining volumes that have occurred and will likely continue for the short term. We tightened our collective belt and everyone has contributed in some way.

As an independent hospital, we wrestle with decisions that have both short-term and long-term impacts to the organization, as well as our local economy. I believe that as a community we share a collective role to ensure our local health care services continue strong and independent for generations to come. I anticipate rural Oregon will lag a little from the statewide peak COVID-19 projections. However, the news that by mid-May we will have likely seen the worst has given me a sense of optimism. We are getting closer to the recovery period that will follow the response phase we are in now.

As we think about both phases, it is vitally important to note that Union County's everyday medical needs do not disappear during a pandemic. Are our volumes down because people do not need health care? Or are some patients who truly need care canceling appointments because of uncertainty

Your views

Bill Miller has knowledge, integrity and honesty

The position of sheriff of Union County is one of the most important positions, if not the most important, of our county. We the people elect the sheriff, and as an elected law enforcement officer he should serve and protect the people who elected him. This requires knowledge of the laws, experience as a law enforcement officer, integrity and honesty.

Bill Miller, as far as I am concerned, is the most qualified candidate for the position of Union County sheriff.

*Pat Bruce
Union*

Bill Miller should lead important department

The primary election for Union County sheriff provides the voting citizens of Union County an opportunity to make a change for the betterment of their community. In a primary election the candidate that gathers a majority (more than 50%) of the vote is the winner. If no contender reaches that threshold, the two candidates with the highest percentages face each other in the November general election.

As a resident and Union County property owner, I have, like many of my fellow citizens, paid literally thousands of dollars in property taxes over the past 40-plus years to fund local government and related services.

The Union County Sheriff's Office is the largest department in Union County government, in terms of employees, with a budget of nearly \$5 million. As we evaluate the four candidates currently vying for the position of sheriff, we should be very thorough in examining each of them and rating their ability to take command of this important department.

A few years ago, I was the victim of a property theft and the resulting reaction from Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen and his deputy was less than any citizen deserves. He showed a true

lack of leadership and demonstrated an absence of command authority.

One of the other candidates is a charismatic deputy with nine years of experience. He is well known as he is a native, and as the school resource officer and youth sports coach, he is an asset that should stay in place. Given more experience and training, he may one day be ready to lead the sheriff's office, but that time is not now.

Another candidate has returned to the area after a career in the military. I thank him for his service. His military career focused on law enforcement in his branch of service. He has no such experience in the public sector and needs certification to serve in public law enforcement.

Bill Miller, an Eastern Oregon native with 20-plus years in law enforcement experience, is the fourth candidate. He has numerous certifications and awards. He is an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Air Force, and as an honor graduate of Eastern Oregon University, he has the intellect and drive to succeed. He is held in high regard as a man of integrity by his contemporaries in law enforcement and has a work ethic that is above reproach.

We should elect Bill Miller to lead the most important department in county government.

*John E. Coote
Island City*

We can trust Sheriff Rasmussen

I would like to show my support for Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen. I moved to La Grande in 2006 to take the position as the manager of Avista, here in Union County. As manager I was introduced to the area leaders. Sheriff Rasmussen was one of those individuals. We became friends over the last 14 years. I have come to recognize Sheriff Rasmussen as a person I can count on.

I was given his cellphone number then and have used it many times over the years. I have been involved

in whether to keep a scheduled visit or not? Our local medical experts tell me that if we do not address our community's health care needs now, it will only exacerbate projections of an influx of critically ill patients in the coming weeks.

I trust the clinical judgment of our medical staff to care for the needs of our community. I appreciate the realistic, thoughtful and compassionate approach our providers and staff have taken. As such, GRH is strongly advocating for clear and consistent messaging from our elected officials as it relates to all of the care we are able to provide during this response.

Currently, there are conflicting messages from elected officials — both state and federal — on whether outpatient care is considered elective or essential. We encourage our elected officials to consider a more nuanced approach to the blanket restrictions imposed on all health care facilities that will empower our providers to use their clinical judgment for determination of what is medically necessary.

If the outpatient care model is not supported and embraced as a needed component to an emergency operations plan, the overcrowding of hospitals that these elected officials hope to avoid could lead to an influx of avoidable ER visits and devastate intensive resources when most needed.

As an organization, I am convinced that we are fully prepared to handle this current pandemic as it peaks in our community, while we continue to safely provide the quality of care we promise.

with him on several occasions and watched him interact with people. I have watched him coach football for several seasons, and can say that he is very competitive but always honest and positive.

I remember standing next to him at the Blue Mountain Conference Center when the Forest Service was presenting their plan to close a large amount of the mountain roads. He was there and stood for our rights. I can say that if we ever get in a bind here in Union County, I fully trust him as sheriff to have our backs.

*Don Kellogg
La Grande*

Protect your neighbors — wear a mask

I had an appointment at the Fourth Street Medical Clinic this week as a follow-up to an emergency room visit at Grande Ronde Hospital. I was troubled to witness the lack of distancing and masking by both the staff and the patients.

While there was a monitor in the parking lot asking the appropriate questions about possible coronavirus infection, she did not offer a mask, even though she had a stack of them. Fortunately, I had my own mask, and when I entered the facility, the front desk staff had masks, but they were pulled down around their chins. Both the doctor and the medical assistants were not wearing masks, and there was no signage about keeping one's distance from other patients.

I realize that Union County has the great good fortune to have a paucity of confirmed cases, but I would rather see our medical facilities err on the side of caution rather than witness a full-blown outbreak that could potentially kill some of our beloved residents.

Please, people, take this seriously. Distancing and mask wearing is such a small gesture to keep you and your neighbors safe.

*Emelie Montgomery-Jones
La Grande*

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