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## SPECIAL REPORT

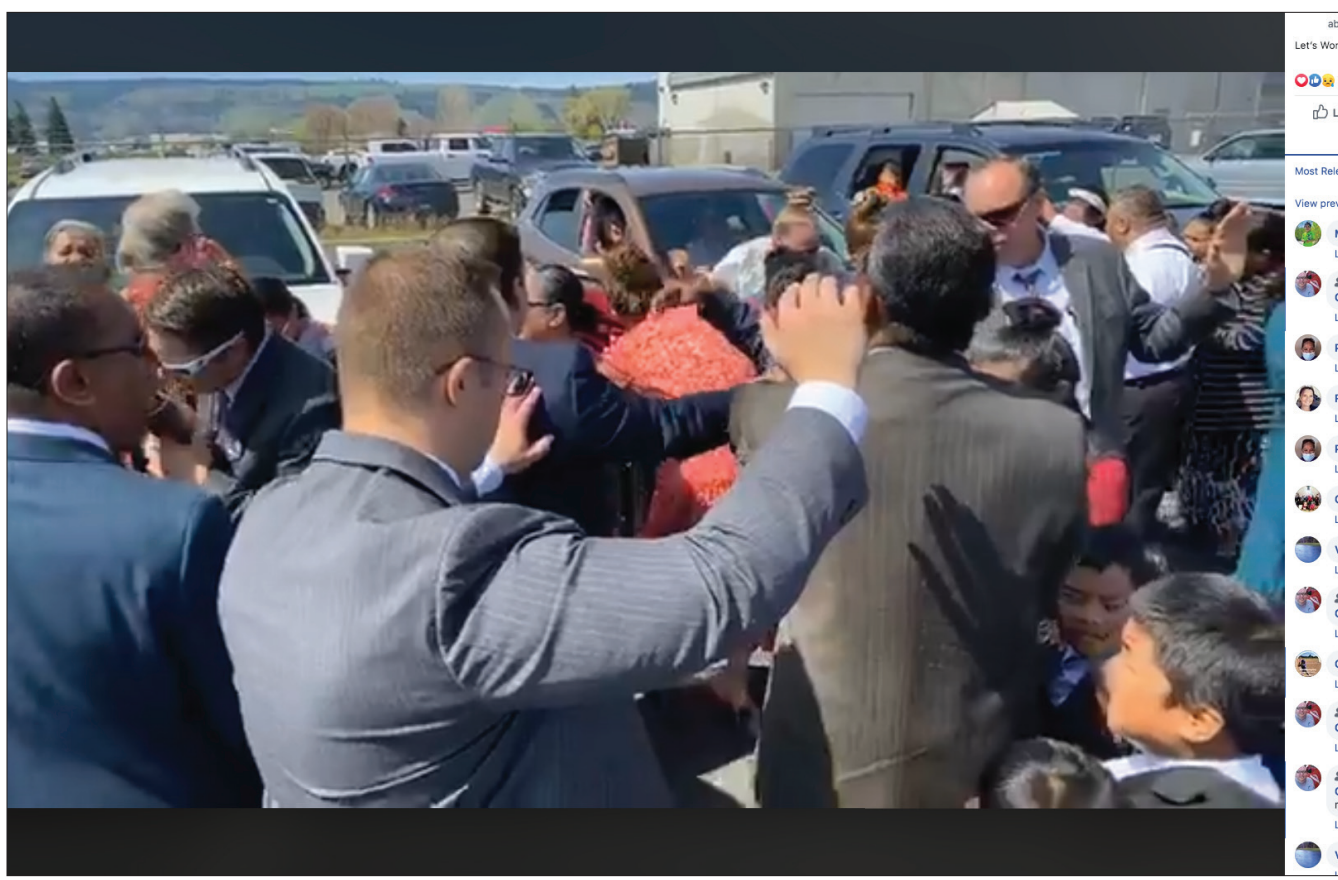
# Community reels from outbreak

By Ronald Bond and Sabrina Thompson  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Union County on Wednesday added only two new cases of COVID-19 to its total, but the 242 still is good enough for the fifth most in the state.

The county on Tuesday added 119 confirmed cases of COVID-19, making it the hotspot in the state, according to the Oregon Health Authority. The spike prompted business to shut doors and the city of La Grande to close parks. The Union County Board of Commissioners voted to recommend rolling back to Phase 1 guidelines.

The board of commissioners met Wednesday morning via a Zoom call to address the community's concerns about the outbreak. Members of the Center for Human Development, the Union County Sheriff's Office, La Grande Police Department and the Incident Management Team's J.B. Brock sat in on the meeting to provide further information and recommendations. In addition to recommending the roll back to Phase 1, commis-



Church members of La Grande's Lighthouse Pentecostal Church placed their hands on one another during a service April 26 in this Facebook photo, despite Gov. Brown's executive order to stay home and limit large gatherings of people. The church is the source of the COVID-19 outbreak in Union County.

sioners voted to recommend wearing masks.

The two motions are only recommendations. Commissioner Matt Scarfo

said the board is looking into what power it has to enforce and regulate phases and mask use. Commissioner Donna Beverage said

she would rather trust residents to voluntarily enact Phase 1 guidelines.

La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell and Union

County Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen confirmed there will be no formal enforcement of guidelines.

"I know some would like

to see us take more heavy-handed enforcement action, but it is really difficult at this time," Bell said. "These are good people."

The two top local law enforcement officers said their agencies will continue to look into complaints about people not following guidelines and make recommendations to those who don't to reconsider their actions to keep the community safe.

"I think we are prepared as any community to deal with this," Rasmussen said. "We were put on the map with how this has happened and we are on the map on how we are going to handle this."

Public Health Administrator Carrie Brogoitti said what happens next in the county depends on every member of the community stepping up.

"We don't have a reliable treatment or vaccine," she said. "So the tools we have to use are the preventative measures."

"This is a big deal," La Grande Mayor Steve Clements said Wednesday. "It's a community crisis that needs

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## Contact tracing key to mapping spread of virus

By Sabrina Thompson  
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Union County public health workers are getting some help tracking down who might be a victim of the coronavirus outbreak.

The county has five public health staff working on investigations. Thomas Jeanne, deputy state health officer and epidemiologist, said during a Tuesday afternoon call with media the Oregon Health Authority is providing 10 additional contact tracers, two on the ground in Union County and eight working remotely.

Contact tracers take up their work after investigators have identified and notified people who have been in close contact with someone who has or is

likely to have COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, contact tracers go through a four-step process.

Step one is rapid notification of exposure. Contact tracers will call those close contacts to notify them they may have been exposed to the virus. The CDC suggests all communication should be over phone, text or email — however, if in-person communication is required, tracers must adhere to social distancing standards and wear personal protective equipment.

A person with a confirmed case may choose to voluntarily identify close contacts. During this notification no identifying information about

the person with the case is given, even if the close contact asks.

Step two is to interview the contact to find out if there is any additional potential for a spread. The contact tracer will ask questions about a person's identification, such as name, date of birth and contact information, in addition to demographic details, such as race, ethnicity and disability information. The tracer also could ask about a person's occupation and if they are feeling any symptoms of COVID-19.

Contact tracers treat the answers as confidential and private, and they do not ask for someone's Social Security number,

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## Wallowa hospital ready to help

By Bill Bradshaw  
EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — Wallowa County may have avoided the brunt of COVID-19 cases, but the hospital there stands ready to help neighboring counties, such as with the massive surge in cases reported this week in Union County.

"While there is no way to predict the potential needs of other hospitals related to a COVID surge, we are committed to helping our fellow hospitals any way we can," said Brooke Pace, communications and public relations director for Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Enterprise.

Pace said the 25-bed hospital is unlikely to be called upon to help since critical coronavirus patients are more likely to go to facilities with a larger



Photo by Bill Bradshaw/EO Media Group

Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Enterprise, stands ready to help hospitals in neighboring counties, such as with the recent COVID-19 surge in Union County. The tent outside the ambulance entrance is for testing of possible COVID-19 patients.

capacity for intensive care patients.

"Due to our size, if transfers happen, we are more likely to receive non-COVID patients," she said.

She said she does not know how many beds are available, as that changes

hourly. But the hospital is nowhere near capacity at present.

However, Pace said, the hospital has made plans.

"In a surge situation, our overflow plan would

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## Baker County offers hospital beds, contact tracing, call center

By Jayson Jacoby  
EO Media Group

BAKER CITY — Baker County has offered assistance as Union County officials respond to Oregon's biggest COVID-19 outbreak.

Baker County's emergency response team also is prepared for potential new cases. Baker County has had only one confirmed case of the virus, reported May 6.

"It's prudent for us to keep all of our staff ready," said Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner and the county's incident com-

mander during the pandemic. "We're not an island. We're a little more sensitive because we're so close and we have so much interaction with Union County."

Bennett said he spoke with Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes on Monday and offered to have some of Baker County's 14 contact tracers help with the Union County investigation, or any other assistance Baker County could provide.

"We offered right away," Bennett said.

Bennett said Anderes told him both the state and Umatilla County also are helping, and so far none of Baker County's contact tracers have been needed.

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City, the county's only hospital, has "a surge plan in place and (we) are prepared for an increase in patients should that occur," Laura Huggins, a spokesperson for the hospital, wrote in an email to the Herald on Tuesday.

The plan Baker County submitted to the state prior

to Phase 1 of reopening, which started May 15, stated Saint Alphonsus had boosted its capacity from 25 beds to 35, including five intensive care unit beds.

In addition, the county has arranged an alternate site with the capacity for up to 60 more beds.

Bennett said the county's emergency management team had a discussion Monday, and the team confirmed the county's contact tracers are ready if needed.

Bennett also said the county is ready to operate

a call center if the Baker County Health Department starts to receive more calls from concerned residents than its staff can handle.

The call center, which would be staffed by county employees, is designed to give residents the information that's also available on the county's COVID-19 website, [www.bakercounty-covid19.com](http://www.bakercounty-covid19.com).

Bennett said he understands that not all residents have internet access, and that some would prefer to talk to a person.

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### WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight 49 LOW Partly cloudy  
Friday 79/55 Mostly sunny

### CONTACT US

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3 sections, 22 pages  
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