COVID-19 testing, recovery data slows in Union County

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Public health in Union County is backing off testing for COVID-19.

And data on the number of individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 — both at the local and state level — is likely to see a delay moving forward. That's according to a press release from the Center for Human Development, La Grande, which reported it will temporarily suspend testing and testing clinics.

Demand for COVID-19 testing has increased across the state and nation in the past three weeks, according to the press release, which has "surpassed the abilities for the laboratories to process and release results as expected."

The center now will limits its testing to individuals identified through investigations or individuals that meet Oregon State Public Health Lab criteria. The center is "experiencing significant delays in receiving lab results on previous tests," the press release stated.

The center encouraged individuals interested in getting a test for the coronavirus to contact a primary care provider at other locations in the community.

CHD also anticipates a national shortage of COVID-19 testing supplies and points to highly populated states where there have been surges in cases — California, Florida and Texas — partly behind the reason supplies could be affected throughout Oregon. The nation has more than 3 million cases of COVID-19, and has consistently seen the reporting of the number of positive test results increase by at least 500,000 a day.

To date, Union County has 369 cases of COVID-19, and CHD reported no new cases Sunday or Monday. CHD has reported 46 individuals have recovered from the illness, and two have died, leaving 321 active cases.

Oregon Health Authority also is planning to cease its efforts to call those with positive cases to assess their status and report recoveries, a task it did on a weekly basis, according to the press release from the Center for Human Development. The state is making the change because of the increase in the number of cases across Oregon.

This means, in part, the number of recoveries reported may not be reflective of the overall recovery rates, the CHD said.

COMPLAINTS

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diagnosis of injury as well as training for all of the department's paramedics on working with patients who may have a disability. Cornford said the department resolved the complaint by May 5, 2018, and the person who made the complaint was good with the resolution.

The police department during those four years sustained only one of the 11 complaints, according to information from Police Chief Gary Bell, meaning police found there was evidence to support the complaint. The department determined five were unfounded, one was not sustained and the other four led to exonerations. Bell also pointed out the department handled 39,729 calls during the four years.

Complaints submitted against the police department primarily were from people unhappy about the way an officer handled a situation. The lone complaint the department sustained was in regard to off-duty behavior of an officer.

Bell could not provide additional information about the sustained complaint, due to ORS 181A.830(3) and 192.345(12).

"It is very important to us that we be as transparent and open with our records and processes as we are legally able, to maintain the trust and legitimacy that we enjoy within our community," he said.

Complaints at state level

Union County sheriff's Lt. Ken Woodward reported there were not any formal complaints during the time frame, as did the rest of county government. However, the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training reported it received one complaint about the sheriff's office in 2017 about a reserve deputy who was having an extramarital affair, an action that violated DPSST's code of standards and ethics.

Woodward said the complaint was made directly to the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training and not to the Union County Sheriff's Office, and he could not provide any further information about the complaint.

DPSST also reported a complaint against a La Grande police sergeant and several Oregon State Police troopers. Bell confirmed the complaint regarding the La Grande sergeant is not part of the 11 he provided information on because it was reported at the state level.

The complainant in 2017 accused the LGPD sergeant of issuing an unjustified citation and improper filing two years earlier.

In the 2015 incident, the sergeant brought a driver to the police station on suspicion of driving under the influence after the person hit a boulder with their vehicle and drove off. According to the police report, the sergeant said the driver smelled of alcohol but refused to participate in intoxication tests. When the driver finally submitted to a breathalyzer, the person blew a 0.01%, but the sergeant's report said it seemed low for the way the driver behaved. The legal limit for blood alcohol content in the state of Oregon is 0.08%. The driver was cited for DUI and hit-and-run, among other charges.

Ultimately the case was dismissed in court. However, the police department reported it completed an investigation into the incident. Derick Reddington, a lieutenant in the department at the time, wrote a letter in 2018 reporting he spoke with the district attorney's office about the case and reviewed applicable criminal laws and vehicle code violations and determined the sergeant had acted appropriately.

"It is my hope you may also review the chapters that I will be referring to," according to the letter, "so that you will have a better understanding why Sgt. Kristen Rasmussen responded and processed this case as she did."

The complainant in a response noted no one interviewed him during the LGPD investigation. DPSST eventually deemed the matter out of its jurisdiction and closed the case.

State law also requires law enforcement agencies to annually report any instances of discrimination. The La Grande Police Department and Union County Sheriff's Office reported there have been zero discrimination complaints from 2017-20.

SHAHBAZI

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local weather experts.

"We will have the most meteorologists (of any news organization) in the nation," Shahbazi said.

The news anchor said while she will miss her many friends, viewers and colleagues in Miami, from a professional standpoint, deciding to take her new position was not difficult.

"Once I understood the mission and the vision (of those creating News Nation) the choice was clear," she said.

Shahbazi was at KFOR, a CBS affiliate, throughout her five-year tenure in Miami before accepting her position with WGN America. At KFOR, Shahbazi won a regional Emmy Award in 2016 and earlier that year was named one of Miami's most influential women by Ocean Drive Magazine. The Miami News Times honored her as "Best TV News Anchor," and she was the recipient of the Christopher Columbus News Network award for "Best Anchor" during her tenure at KFOR.

Shahbazi has worked at five stations since she began her television career in 2008, including KEPR in Pasco. A highlight when working there was the opportunity to do an on-camera interview with Barack Obama, then a U.S. Senator making a presidential campaign stop in Pendleton.

"It was a short interview but it was definitely exciting," she said. "He was very nice and took the time to talk to reporters in a small town. Not everyone does that."

Shahbazi had just started her career after earning her master's degree in journalism, which had an emphasis on television production. She did her master's thesis on the many refugees who fled to Jordan because of fighting in the Middle East. The thesis, which included extensive footage and interviews Shahbazi shot in Jordan, ended up on the website of PBS' international newsmagazine Frontline/World.

"It was a story that needed to be told," said Shahbazi, who was born in Germany and is no stranger to world travel after accompanying her parents on many international trips while growing up.

At Berkeley, Shahbazi learned the art of recording video images and editing footage. She credits

Contributed photo
Rudabeh Shahbazi, a La Grande High graduate, is about to become the anchor of a national news program.

these skills with helping her land a job right out of college 12 years ago when the Great Recession was hitting. Stations were cutting back then and seeking reporters with multiple skills as a cost-saving step. Shahbazi often found herself doing video reports alone, and she sometimes had to record herself.

"It was backbreaking work," Shahbazi said.

She took subsequent jobs with stations in Los Angeles and Arizona. On more than one occasion she found herself taking risks or using unorthodox means to get stories. Once when she was in Arizona she covered a flood that washed out a bridge to a community. Shahbazi got a ride on a personal watercraft to get to the community.

One of the saddest stories she covered was the Jan. 8, 2011, shooting at a Casa Adobes grocery store near Tucson, Arizona, which killed six people and injured a number of others including Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, who suffered a serious brain injury.

"That was a pivotal story," Shahbazi said, speaking of the impact it had on her.

Shahbazi was struck by how deeply the shooting touched the small community and by how residents extended hands of assistance to so many, including members of the media, a number of whom spent considerable time in the community.

"They wanted the story about the victims to get out," Shahbazi said.

In Miami, one of the most exhausting challenges Shahbazi faced was covering the frequent hurricanes.

"We would provide wall-to-wall coverage," she said. "One time we were at the station for five days."

She said that during times like this a station's staff bonds even more with its viewers.

"We did not lose track that we are all in this together," she said.

The television journalist said she she owes her career to her upbringing in La Grande, where her mother, Theresa Gillis Noldeke, and her father, Shapur Shahbazi, both worked at Eastern Oregon University. Her mother is a reference librarian at Pierce Library, and her father, who died in 2006, was a history professor.

"Eastern was like my backyard," Shahbazi said.

Rudabeh Shahbazi's immediate family members with Union County ties also include her stepfather Charlie Gillis, a La Grande attorney, and her brother, Michael Gillis, who grew up in La Grande and now lives in Eugene. Shahbazi said she cannot imagine spending her childhood in a more nurturing place than the Grande Ronde Valley.

"I'm so grateful that I got to grow up in La Grande with such a loving and supportive family," Shahbazi said.

She said she also benefited from the caring local community.

"There are so many people who will rally all around you," she said. "It was like being part of a big family."

Shahbazi remains good friends with many of her classmates from La Grande High, people she looks up during her many return visits to La Grande.

"We hang out together," she said.

The future TV news anchor sat in on EOU classes her father taught, did homework in the university's library where her mother still works, took part in on-campus productions like Island Magic with Eastern students, attended colloquiums and got to know many international students.

"This all had an important role in my development," Shahbazi said.

At La Grande High, Shahbazi said she was blessed to have excellent teachers, including English writing and debate teacher Deanna Brickman, art teacher Bob Jensen and science teacher Larry Morrison, all now retired.

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RULES

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cases per day by the Labor Day weekend at the beginning of September. Brown's current emergency order runs out Sept. 4.

The Oregon Health Authority reported 280 new cases of COVID-19 on Monday, bringing the state total to 12,438. Three more deaths were reported — one each in Umatilla, Marion and Clackamas County — bringing the state total to 237 dead from the virus.

Nationwide, about 3.35 million people in the United States have been infected with the coronavirus and at least 135,100 have died as of Monday, according to a New York Times database. The newspaper said the worldwide count as of Monday was 12.9 million cases and more than 569,000 deaths.

Brown said she believed most Oregonians were following the face covering, social distancing and enhanced hygiene efforts that health officials advocate. She called those who willingly ignore the efforts "outliers."

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