



Northeast Oregon Joint Information Center/Contributed Photo
Workers prepare a swab test for COVID-19 during a drive-thru clinic in June at the Union County Fairgrounds, La Grande. The county's positive test rate for the novel coronavirus in November ranks among the worst in Oregon.

NUMBERS

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where Multnomah County's tests have come back positive for the virus at an overall rate of 6%, Union County's have come back at 9% positive.

Malheur County remains the most severely affected county in the state per capita. The county's health department reported it has a daily positive rate of 22% on COVID-19 tests. The sparsely populated county also has recorded 39 deaths.

Those numbers relate to the pandemic overall, since March. However, when more recent trends in test positivity are highlighted, they illustrate a startling reality.

According to tracking data from the Oregon Health Authority, 257 reported COVID-19 tests were performed in Union County Nov. 8-14. Of those 257 tests, 68 were positive — a rate of 26.5%.

For comparison, during that same time period Multnomah County's positivity rate was 13.3%, and Malheur County, which was experiencing the worst per capita outbreak in the state, tested positive at 28.2%.

Across the state and in Union County specifically, the numbers show the pandemic is deepening in its severity, and the consequences have been manifold.

Hospital capacity

Grande Ronde Hospital reimplemented restrictions on visits to patients that it had rolled back earlier this year. The hospital also reported in a Tuesday press release that its workforce had been "impacted" by COVID-19. On Wednesday, OHA reported six cases related to a workplace outbreak at the hospital.

While the hospital remains well-stocked with personal protective equipment and said it expected no disruptions to its service, hospitals in the region and across the state are carrying heavy loads.

Oregon's hospital capacity is tracked by region. Union, Malheur, Baker, Willowa, Umatilla and Morrow Counties make up Region 9, where availability for staffed intensive care unit beds has fallen to just over one-third of total capacity, with only 10 ICU beds available in the region

as of Thursday, according to data from the OHA.

Nearby Region 6, which includes The Dalles and Hood River, had only four of their 10 ICU beds available, and Region 7, which includes most of Central Oregon, had space in only five of their 49.

Non-ICU beds are also dwindling in supply. As of Nov. 19, just 49 beds, or 36.6% of total, remain available in the region.

With hospitals approaching capacity across the state and in neighboring states, the once-heralded phrase "flatten the curve" has become perhaps more relevant than ever before.

Consequences

Throughout the public health crisis, public health officials have pleaded with the public to practice proper pandemic hygiene: social distancing, hand washing, minimizing social interactions and working from home whenever possible. Despite warnings from officials, COVID-19 has exploded across the country and state and within the county.

Outbreaks took hold this month in La Grande at the Wildflower Lodge Assisted Living Community and Grande Ronde Hospital. Cases have reached La Grande, Union, Cove and Imbler school districts, and some of those districts have returned to online learning formats.

Gov. Kate Brown placed the entire state of Oregon under a two-week "freeze" that began Wednesday, Nov. 18, and extends through the Thanksgiving holiday. The order restricts restaurants to takeout and delivery services, closes gyms, fitness centers, theaters and museums, and prohibits indoor visitation at long-term care facilities, among other mandates. With Thanksgiving around the corner, the Oregon Health Authority is pleading with Oregonians to limit the size of their holiday gatherings.

Additionally, Oregon, Washington and California issued travel advisories against nonessential out-of-state travel and are asking travelers to self-quarantine for 14 days after arriving at their destination.

The COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than a quarter of a million people in the U.S. and has infected more than 11 million.

FREEZE

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The number of new and presumptive cases of COVID-19 in Oregon set another one-day record Friday with 1,306, while the day before also was the single deadliest in Oregon for reported deaths from the virus with 20.

Locally, the Center for Human Development, La Grande, announced 17 new cases of COVID-19 Friday, bringing the county's six-day total to 76, and the total since the start of the pandemic to 655.

"Taking risk reduction measures today is critical to slowing the spread of COVID-19 to keep those in our community that are more vulnerable to serious illness and death safe and to helping maintain hospital capacity so that all Oregonians can continue to have access to quality care," CHD stated in the announcement.

The executive order lists facilities that must close during the two-week freeze, including "gyms and fitness organizations," but does not go into detail about the definition of a gym.

Other gyms disregard the freeze

Anytime Fitness is not the only gym in the region disregarding the freeze. A trio of gyms in Umatilla County are taking unique steps to stay open.

Club 24, which owns locations in Hermiston and Pendleton, notified members that during the shutdown it will turn over control of its facilities to Tawtnuk Wellness Institute, which will operate the gyms as "wellness clinics." Hermiston Athletic Club in Hermiston posted a similar message on its Facebook page.

The website for Tawtnuk Wellness Institute describes the institute as fulfilling "the holistic wellness of all communities by converting health clubs, gyms, and fitness centers to wellness facilities" and offers two links, one to an intake form for Club 24 and one for Hermiston Athletic Club. It lists Orien Fiander, who has in the past described himself as the CEO of Club 24 and owner of Hermiston Athletic Club, as its owner and CEO.

According to information on the Club 24 website, members of its gyms in Oregon and Washington will be able to work out on-site during the shutdown if they bring a doctor's note prescribing exercise or if they fill out an intake form for Tawtnuk Wellness Institute. Tawtnuk will conduct a temperature screening at the door, require sign-ins for contact tracing purposes, conduct "enhanced



Phil Wright/The Observer

Gym users work out without masks Thursday night, Nov. 19, 2020, at Anytime Fitness, La Grande, which is remaining open despite Gov. Kate Brown's orders to shutdown for two weeks to help ebb the spike in the spread of COVID-19.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

The Club 24 in Pendleton, as well as those in other parts of Oregon and Washington, is turning over control of its facility to Tawtnuk Wellness Institute, which will operate the gyms as "wellness clinics," as a means of staying open safely during the pandemic.

cleaning protocols" and require masks at all times. Some amenities, such as showers and saunas, will be closed.

"Overall, the look and feel should be close to what you are used to when it comes to Club 24 facilities with direct changes that will only make our facilities cleaner in order to allow you to keep improving your health," an email to members stated.

The email also outlined the financial difficulties Club 24 has faced this year, through shutdowns when Umatilla County was in baseline or Phase 1, and through people canceling their memberships.

"Cherished colleagues had to find new jobs because other businesses were able to be open when we were not," the email stated.

Those concerns echoed other complaints that gyms in Oregon have made during the latest shutdown. The Statesman Journal reported Courthouse Club Fitness in Salem was staying open in defiance of the governor's executive order, quoting a statement from owner John Miller: "As a result of the harm done to our business from the first shutdown, we will not survive another closure." The article claimed

other gyms in Salem indicated they also were considering staying open.

Police emphasize education

Brown has said she expected law enforcement to take an "education first approach" to non-compliance, but the rules under the two-week freeze were enforceable under the law. La Grande police emphasize education over citations.

La Grande police Lt. Jason Hays in an email stated, "In regards to Anytime Fitness or any business in La Grande who is in violation of the Governor's executive orders or COVID related restrictions, the La Grande Police Department will continue to educate the business owners on the fluctuating rules in an effort to assist them with compliance. COVID related violations that occur in a business fall under the jurisdiction of the Oregon Occupational Health and Safety Administration."

Hays also said Police Chief Gary Bell talked to the owner of Anytime Fitness just prior to the freeze and educated him on the governor's directives for the impending freeze. Hays also reported that Anytime Fitness's remaining open

under the freeze orders has been referred to OSHA.

Oregon OSHA has conducted much of the enforcement of Brown's orders in regard to business operations during the pandemic. Spokesperson Aaron Corvin said "willful violations" have resulted in citations.

"Oregon OSHA would have to evaluate a situation and let the facts drive what we do," Corvin said. "I would say ... on its face, if you have a business that is defying, openly disregarding these restrictions, you would have a situation where they're doing it willfully, and at OSHA we have issued citations for willful violations for employers who violate the restrictions."

Still, he stressed, OSHA would have to determine the facts about what is happening at Anytime Fitness, "but on its face, that is a willful disregard for the requirements to maintain a safe and healthy workplace for workers."

Corvin also said if someone makes a complaint about a business not following COVID-19 mandates, OSHA looks into the complaint. Sometimes the agency can work with the business owner to "satisfactorily" resolve the complaint without opening a formal enforcement process, he said, while other times the agency might end up issuing fines and other penalties.

Oregon OSHA's basic expectation is businesses follow the restrictions, he said, including as they apply under the two-week freeze.

La Grande police also stated anyone who notices a business violating COVID-19 safety measures could file a report with the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

To file a complaint online, visit: <https://osha.oregon.gov/workers/Pages/index.aspx>.



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