

CASES

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period to escape categorization as an extreme risk county, which carries with it the most severe public health measures.

There are three active workplace outbreaks in La Grande, according to the weekly report the Oregon Health Authority released Wednesday, Dec. 2.

Wildflower Lodge Assisted Living Community continues to be the most severe outbreak in the county. According to OHA, Wildflower Lodge had accrued 63 cases as of Wednesday, an increase from 48 cases one week earlier. The outbreak reportedly includes three deaths at the facility.

Wildflower Lodge has not returned multiple requests for comment on the outbreak.

Another active outbreak is ongoing at Northwood Manufacturing, where COVID-19 has infected at least 15 people. The most recent onset of the virus at Northwood is listed as Nov. 23, though Oregon Health Authority has been investigating the workplace since early last month and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration investigated it in July.

Grande Ronde Hospital’s workplace outbreak has stabilized but remains active. According to OHA, the hospital’s outbreak remains at eight cases in total, which is unchanged from the previous week’s report.

Public health officials

such as OHA Director Pat Allen have expressed concerns about the potential of a post-Thanksgiving spike in COVID-19 cases, which would likely materialize in the weeks following the holiday if it comes to fruition.

Oregon’s unprecedented total on Friday of more than 2,000 cases and 30 deaths could be the early signs of such a spike.

Carrie Brogoitti, Union County public health administrator, said she shares Allen’s concerns.

“We do anticipate there could be an after-Thanksgiving spike,” Brogoitti said. “When we’ve looked at other holidays where people tend to gather with people outside of their household, there have been spikes.”

Brogoitti said based on the time it takes for people to develop symptoms and for COVID-19 to become detectable through testing, any post-holiday spike would likely begin to appear 10-14 days after people gathered for their holiday celebrations.

The Center for Human Development will hold several free testing clinics in the coming weeks.

For more information, visit the center’s website at www.chdinc.org.

Hospital capacity

Since the early days of the pandemic, public health officials have warned of a potential grim scenario: hospitals so packed with COVID-19 patients they have a shortage of space, supplies and staff. Thus, the phrase “flatten the curve” was born and restrictive

public safety measures were placed on social gatherings and the businesses that rely on them.

But as colder months drove people inside and pandemic fatigue set in, the curve at the national, state and local levels has turned sharply upward.

As of Thursday, Dec. 3, the six counties that make up Oregon’s emergency response Region : — Union, Baker, Morrow, Wallowa, Umatilla and Malheur — had among them a total of five available intensive care unit beds, a precipitous drop from 15 available ICU beds on Monday.

Four of the counties in Region 9 are among the state’s top-five worst per-capita outbreaks, according to OHA. Union County is fifth-worst with 3,014 infections per 100,000 residents. Malheur County remains the most densely infected with 7,676.9 per 100,000 residents. Umatilla and Morrow counties are second and third worst per capita, respectively.

Grande Ronde Hospital spokesperson Mardi Ford said as of Thursday morning, 19 of 25 beds at the hospital were occupied, which was roughly average for this time of year. The OHA weekly report indicated the hospital had between one and nine COVID-19 patients.

“We’re busy, but not overwhelmed,” Ford said.

GRH has joined Oregon’s statewide COVID-19 immunization program, Ford said, and the hospital expects a phased distribution “if and when a COVID-19 vaccine

is authorized for use in the U.S.”

As of press time on Friday, no COVID-19 vaccine had received authorization of any kind from the Food and Drug Administration, though one vaccine developed by Pfizer was authorized for use in the United Kingdom earlier this week.

Schools

La Grande School District conducted only limited in-person instruction this week after the high number of virus cases and high test positivity rate pushed even K-6 learning into online formats.

In a Nov. 30 press release, Superintendent George Mendoza said the district would likely continue conducting Comprehensive Distance Learning until the end of winter break if this week’s data, to be reviewed on Dec. 7, proved unfavorable.

Cove, Imbler, Union, North Powder and Elgin schools remained open for in-person instruction this week, though the county’s smaller districts have not avoided disruptions.

Union School District had one student cohort quarantined through the week due to COVID-19 exposure. Those students are expected to return to in-person instruction on Monday, according to Superintendent Carter Wells.

North Powder had multiple students and one staff member in quarantine this week due to virus exposure outside the school,

said Superintendent Lance Dixon, who dismissed rumors that students had been taken on a field trip to Boise before being exposed as untrue.

The superintendents of eight Eastern Oregon school districts signed their names to a letter to Gov. Kate Brown on Thursday, urging her to allow schools to offer in-person learning regardless of the prevalence of COVID-19 in their communities.

“As we continue to see research showing no consistent link between school reopening and increased community spread of COVID-19, requiring distance learning no longer makes sense,” the letter states.

The superintendents of Elgin, Imbler, Cove, North Powder, Baker, Nyssa, Helix and Adrian school districts signed the letter. Union School District on Friday called on its community to voice their opposition to distance learning in a social media campaign.

“It is nearly impossible to teach a child to read through comprehensive distance learning,” the letter said.

Contact tracing

Across the state and locally, contact tracers — those whose task it has been to contact people who’ve tested positive for COVID-19 and determine who may have been exposed — have struggled to keep up with the burden posed by surging infections.

In Union County, only 56% of COVID-19 cases

were contacted by public health entities within 24 hours of testing positive during the week of Nov. 22-28, down from 86% the week before, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority.

Union County’s Center for Human Development has seven staff members trained for contact tracing, and the county enlists the aid of several nonprofit organizations to complete the task.

Brogoitti, the county’s public health administrator, urged anyone who gets a call from a contact tracer to answer and praised the efforts of those doing the often-difficult work.

“Even when we’re busy, we prioritize making sure that initial contact gets made so people know they were a contact and so we can get them instructions for how to quarantine, what to look out for, when to seek testing, when to contact their health care provider, and also giving them information on wraparound services so they can quarantine if needed,” she said.

Wraparound services are aid programs designed to make it more feasible for people to stay home and quarantine, such as financial assistance, food banks, grocery pickup and delivery services, health insurance and veterans’ services.

Contact tracers will never ask for any financial information or for social security numbers, Brogoitti said, adding she would be “very skeptical” of anyone who asked for that information.

LETTER

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Lewis said he was confident that health care professionals from x-ray technicians to nurses would have gladly signed their names to the letter as well, had they been given the opportunity. He noted the letter was released after being circulated for only a few waking hours.

“That was about 10 p.m. to noon, so it was mostly while people were asleep,” Lewis said. “That response of pushing 1,000 was with maybe four daylight hours,

so it was quick and it was immediate. Physicians are a strange group, and they’re pretty driven and they want to do a good job because most of us have strongly bonded with our patients and their goals. We want them to get better and we want them to survive, and we want to know that no matter what happens, we did everything in our power to help them.”

Since the letter was signed and released, the spread of COVID-19 has not relented. Oregon had recorded more than 1,000 positive cases in 16 out of the last 17 days as of

Thursday, Dec. 3, and if a post-holiday spike were to happen, the window when it would likely materialize is just beginning.

“We know that if people encountered the virus on Thanksgiving, it would be seven, 14 days before that wave would hit the hospital,” Lewis said. “Because it takes a little while to get sick, then it’s usually this later-in-the-illness second week when people get the most sick... first, second week of December. Next week, we’ll see. I don’t know if there’s any way to predict it, but people are putting their seat belts on.”

SKATING

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majority of their income from the sit-down dining experience, but we gotta do what we gotta do, I guess.”

In the meantime, local businesses continue to rely on support from their communities as they await a return to normalcy.

Wallowa County, however, is in an altogether different situation as one of just four counties the governor’s office has classified as “lower risk.”

In-person dining is permitted in Wallowa County, and up to 50% of a restaurant or bar’s maximum occupancy can be allowed in for service in groups of up to eight people. Eating and drinking establishments can remain open later, not having to close their doors until midnight.

Wallowa County can have outdoor gatherings of up to 300 people, and gyms, theaters and indoor sports can remain open at 50% capacity.

To reach Wallowa County’s lower risk status, Union

and Baker counties must bring down the level of COVID-19 spread in their communities. Only when a county reports fewer than 30 cases over a 14-day period while testing positive at a rate of less than 5% will that county enter the lower risk category.

According to data from the OHA, Union County recorded 184 cases of COVID-19 in the most recent two-week reporting period and tested positive at 17.9%, while Baker County recorded 66 cases and tested positive at 28.2%.

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