CASES

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Risk remains extreme

The Oregon Health Authority began listing Union County as "moderate risk" this week after the county recorded 43 cases from Dec. 20 to Jan. 2. Test positivity during that time was 3.9%, qualifying Union County to drop out of extreme and into moderate risk safety measures.

However, those changes would not take effect until after a "warning week" had passed, and during that week, the county saw the first signs of a new surge in COVID-19 with 34 cases in two days.

The spike puts the county at 64 cases as of Friday for the two-week period from Dec. 27 to Jan. 9, putting Union County back over the threshold for classification as "extreme risk." Just days from reopening, an apparent new wave of COVID-19 will force Union County to remain under the most stringent public health measures.

Vaccinations begin to roll out

Union County's public health arm, the Center for Human Development, has begun vaccinating an extended group of front-line healthcare workers.

Center for Human Development/Contributed Photo

Nicole Billman, a nurse at the Center for Human Development, La Grande, receives a dose of COVID-19 vaccine from CHD medical assistant Nancy Davila. Billman is one of 364 people in Union County who received their first injection of vaccine as of Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021.

Groups one through four under phase 1a of Oregon's vaccination plan are eligible to get their vaccines in Union County. Here's a breakdown of the groups from the Oregon Health Authority:

• Group 1: hospitals; urgent care; skilled nursing and memory care facility health care personnel and residents; tribal health programs; EMS providers and other first responders.

• Group 2: other long term care facilities and congregate care sites including health care personnel and residents; hospice programs; mobile crisis care and related services; secure transport; individuals working in a correctional setting.

• Group 3: outpatient settings serving specific high-risk groups; in home care; day treatment services; non-emergency medical transport.

• Group 4: Health care personnel in other outpatient, public health and early learning settings; death care workers.

As of Thursday, 364 people in Union County had received their first injections of a COVID-19 vaccine, along with 74,914 across Oregon as of Friday, according to OHA. The number of Oregonians vaccinated lags far behind the number of doses delivered to distribution sites across the state — 252,350, per the Health Authority.

"We understand that there may be concerns around safety and effectiveness of the (vaccine)," CHD said in a statement. "The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are safe and effective. Both vaccines were found to be over 94% effective and neither reported serious safety issues. The vaccines were tested in large-scale research, which included adults from all backgrounds."

Statewide vaccination has rolled out at a crawl in the weeks since Oregon vaccinated its first healthcare workers. The most people vaccinated in a single day in Oregon stands at 7,620 on Dec. 30.

Brown has set a goal of 12,000 vaccinations per day by Jan. 18, but even if Oregon manages to reach that goal, it puts the state on a depressingly slow pace toward widespread vaccination. At 12,000 vaccinations per day, Oregon's 4.2 million residents would not each have the opportunity to get their two doses until late November or early December of 2022.

At the average daily vaccination rate of roughly 3,000 injections per day, every Oregonian would not have the opportunity to get their two doses of vaccine until roughly September 2028.

Officials, including OHA Director Pat Allen, have said they expect improvements to the logistics of vaccine distribution to speed that rate toward the governor's goal of 12,000 per day by the end of next week.

Allen conceded in a press conference on Friday that widespread immunization and herd immunity was many months, and perhaps even more than a year, away.

With full vaccination in Oregon now appearing to be a long-term possibility, the end of the pandemic, mask-wearing and social distancing — which to many had seemed to be rapidly approaching — has now grown only more distant. Allen blamed overly optimistic timelines purported at the federal level for raising hopes prematurely.

Those in Union County who fall into either the 1a category, listed above, or 1b, which includes essential workers, can anticipate being contacted by their employer about vaccination, according to CHD.

Those who are eligible were encouraged to contact CHD by phone at 541-624-2179 or email at vaccine@chdinc.org to schedule their vaccination. Interested parties must provide their name, phone number, email address, place of employment and occupation/job title.

SCHOOL

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In lieu of lockers, the school will require students to carry their textbooks and Chromebooks to and from classes.

Students also will be prohibited from congregating in groups at LMS before school starts, such as in the foyer outside the main entrance during mornings. Instead, they will have to wait outside until the building's doors are opened at 8:50 a.m. McKinney is encouraging parents to drop off students as close as possible to this time.

"We do not have anywhere for them to wait," the principal said.

The sixth-grade students, because of state metrics related to COVID-19, will be on a hybrid schedule. Cohorts of students in alphabetically selected groups will attend school in person on alternate days and receive online instruction via the school district's Comprehensive Distance Learning program the other days. The school day will run from 9 a.m. to 1:25 p.m. for students.

Dick Mason/The Observer, File

Students leave La Grande Middle School on Jan. 10, 2017. The school reopens to students Monday, Jan. 11, 2021, the first time this school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixth-grade students will be taught in the building for the first time. Students in seventh and eighth grade might be allowed to return by the end of January. But new rules means students will not be able to gather together like they have in the past.

McKinley is excited about the opportunity to finally meet many of his students in person. So far, he has been able to interact with students while teaching them online. He said viewing students in person makes it much easier to see how well they are grasping the subject matter.

"Unless I'm face to face, I really can't tell if I'm connecting with kids," McKinley said.

The sixth-grade teacher also is excited about the return to in-person instruction because it means students again can interact with youths their own age. Many have had limited opportunities to do so during the pandemic, not only due to school closures but also because local youth clubs and sports programs shut down.

"Many don't cross paths (with children their own age) unless it is a family gathering," McKinley said.

Principal McKinney recorded a video providing information to sixth graders and their parents about the reopening that is on the La Grande Middle School website, lms.lagrandesd.org. In the video he encourages students to follow new safety rules for social distancing. He said following rules will increase the chances of LMS being able to remain open for in-person instruction.

McKinney said La Grande Middle School's new mantra is "Stay safe, stay open."

CASHELL

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understand their mindset.

"It is important to meet everybody where they are at emotionally. (The pandemic) effects everyone differently," Cashell said.

He said understanding this helps with communication and problem solving.

Cashell is less than a year from overtaking Howard Morris, CCC's commissioner from 1994-2003, as the conference's longest-serving leader, but this is far from his focus. He is excited by what he sees on the horizon for the CCC in the short term and long term. He is hopeful, for example, that men's and women's basketball will be able to start up in March or April.

Cashell also said he feels optimistic about the outlook for CCC's baseball program, especially because Eastern Oregon University reinstated its program after cutting it in 2005 because of financial problems. The addition means the CCC will have a six-team baseball league when collegiate action begins again. The presence of a CCC baseball league, which requires a minimum of six members, will give teams the opportunity to win an automatic post-season playoff berth, Cashell said.

Previously the schools with baseball in the CCC were part of an NAIA West division. It was composed of teams from the CCC and the Frontier Conference and offered no automatic bids for NAIA post-season play to teams based on their records.

Cashell also said he is enthusiastic about the possible addition of CCC lacrosse leagues for men and women in the near future. Five schools in the CCC have added or will be adding the sport, including EOU, which launched a women's lacrosse program in 2019. Eastern's team was scheduled to begin play in 2021 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

"We are paying close attention to men's and women's lacrosse. It is trending in the right direction, so we may be adding it in the future," he said.

Cashell served as the athletic director for the University of Montana Western before coming to Eastern in 2001. He said experience as an athletic director is vital preparation for becoming a commissioner. He said the positions are involved in many of the same tasks, including scheduling. Cashell — who was named the CCC's athletic director of the year for 2007-08 and 2009-10 — said he enjoys taking on the challenges this work poses.

"I'm pretty organized. Attention to detail comes naturally," he explained.

He said as CCC commissioner he works with just about everybody who comes into contact with athletics at the college and university level, including sports information directors, presidents and registrars, just as he did as an athletic director.

"The difference is now I'm working with 23 schools instead of one," he said.

Cashell said he finds his job fulfilling because it gives him the opportunity to provide meaningful opportunities for student athletes.

"This is my passion," he said

This passion ties in with the philosophy of the NAIA, which focuses on developing and providing opportunities for the student athletes, which drew Cashell to the collegiate athletic organization years ago.

"I am an NAIA guy and will always continue to be one," Cashell said.

He said it is easier to work in Corvallis as CCC commissioner because he is closer to more member schools and transportation hubs, including airports. His wife, Heather, who previously worked at EOU, is now the executive assistant for Oregon State University's general counsel, and their daughter, Elizabeth, is a junior at Oregon State.

Cashell said he and his family members always will have a warm place in their hearts for La Grande.

"We love La Grande," he said. "It is a wonderful place and is filled with wonderful people."

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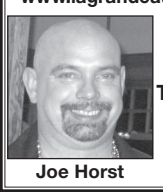
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