

COVID-19 Union County nears 1,100 cases

Gov. Kate Brown announces there is no federal reserve of vaccine doses, delays expansion to seniors

By KALEB LAY
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — New local outbreaks and a return to double-digit daily new COVID-19 cases will keep Union County under “extreme risk” public health measures, even as statewide vaccination efforts finally gain traction. However, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on the morning of Friday, Jan. 15, raised troubling questions about whether or not the state will be able to sustain that momentum, as Oregon received news the U.S. federal stockpile of COVID-19 vaccine doses, which was set to be released to states for distribution, does not exist.

Cases and outbreaks

A new workplace outbreak at Outdoors RV Manufacturing, La Grande, highlighted the continued spread of COVID-19 in Union County. The facility had 12 cases as of Jan. 13, according to the Oregon Health Authority. Outdoors RV is the second RV manufacturing facility to report a workplace outbreak with double-digit cases of COVID-19. Northwood Manufacturing’s outbreak in December brought the number of cases at that workplace to 19. OHA lists that outbreak as “resolved.”

But another outbreak is active at Grande Ronde Retirement Residence, where nine people have been infected and one has died. This is the second COVID-19 outbreak at the facility, which had one in June.

Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, also announced he institution was experiencing an outbreak and would be listed in the OHA’s next outbreak report on Jan. 20.

“EOU anticipated a number of positive test results from proactively testing students prior to the start of term,” the university said in a statement. “These cases were detected after the initial round of proactive testing. Students began experiencing symptoms and responded responsibly by getting tested.

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Dick Mason/The Observer

La Grande Middle School Principal Kyle McKinney chats with properly masked students after school during the first week this year’s sixth graders were able to attend classes on campus.

Back where they belong

LMS educators reflect on first week with sixth graders

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The bustle of sixth-grade students again filled the halls and classrooms at La Grande Middle School.

This past week, because of changing state metrics, was the first time in 10 months the school could offer in-person instruction to all sixth graders. The large number of students coming to the school was a most welcome sight for educators.

“They are bringing music back into our school,” said LMS librarian Keri Myer.

LMS sixth-grade teacher Marissa Rainsberry also said having students back in school has been a delight.

“It has been super fun. I have loved it,” Rainsberry said.

Deanna Comfort, a paraeducator at LMS, was excited to have the sixth graders actually in school because she said she believes they benefit enormously by being in an educational environment rather than at home online.

“They learn so much more

“They are bringing music back into our school.”

— Librarian Keri Myer

“They learn so much more just by being in class.”

— Paraeducator Deanna Comfort

“They are so excited to be back.”

— Teacher Kelly Oliver

just by being in class,” Comfort said.

Kimberly Dowell, a special education teacher, echoed this sentiment. Dowell said it is much easier for teachers to spot what students are having trouble with when they are together in a classroom.

Rainsberry is finding that students are more likely to ask for help in a classroom setting rather than an online one. Rainsberry explained when a teacher answers a student’s question online, the rest of the class can see and hear that,

which can make some feel uneasy. However, in a classroom a student can raise their hand and have a teacher come over and talk about their question in a more private manner.

LMS sixth graders now have their school building to themselves because seventh and eighth graders are not there yet due to COVID-19 metrics. School district officials, though, have said that later this month state metrics could allow all students in grades seven

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La Grande police deal with crisis of mental health

By KALEB LAY
The Observer

LA GRANDE — “My officers are drowning, they’re drowning in these calls. It’s a crisis.”

Those were the words of Lt. Jason Hays of the La Grande Police Department as he explained how his officers have increasingly become the vanguard in dealing with behavior and crises brought on by severe mental illness.

The small police department has been inundated with calls for service to respond to people experiencing mental illness, sometimes tying up the entire on-duty police force for hours at a time.

“The No. 1 thing that is a pressing issue for us and that con-



Lt Jason Hays/La Grande Police Department

Meghan Chancey of the Eastern Oregon Healthy Living Alliance on Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021, leads a class on mental health first aid for public safety for La Grande police officers, 911 dispatchers, Union County Sheriff’s Office corrections deputies and Grande Ronde Hospital security staff. La Grande police report a dramatic increase in calls for service for people experiencing mental illness.

tinues to get worse, not better, is the calls for service we’re responding to for people suffering from mental illness,” Hays said.

From 2007 to 2017, Hays said, calls for service regarding people with mental illness increased more than 1,000%, from 12 total calls in all of 2007 to 144 calls

in 2017. And that figure has only risen since the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Not only does the burden of dealing with mental illness stretch thin the police department’s resources — it does the same to the officers, wearing on their morale.

“They’re like, ‘I’m doing nothing but becoming a mental health counselor when our jobs are hard enough on a daily basis,’” Hays said.

La Grande’s police officers find themselves caught in a cycle,

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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight
31 Low
Mainly cloudy

Sunday
42/34
A shower

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