

RETURN

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“We are young, so we are super adaptable,” Scott said.

Galvez said he is delighted to have students back in class for in-person learning. He explained it is much easier to communicate with students in person than online. However, Galvez also said one good thing came out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

He said it forced the school district to get more electronic devices for its students so they could learn virtually. Now that almost all students have access to these devices, Galvez said, it will be possible for teachers to better use this technology to help students when providing in-person instruction.

Middle school science teacher Kathy Nickerson said



Dick Mason/The Observer

La Grande Middle School students travel toward the entrance of their school building the morning of Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021.

the initial day had a paradoxical twist because the school year was well underway and

she had seen her students online for months. “It was the first day of

school, but we already knew everyone,” Nickerson said. She said the initial day

COVID-19

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that would have jeopardized hospital capacity,” the governor said in a press release. “This means we are able to make these adjustments for Extreme Risk counties, which should assist both businesses and Oregonians as we continue to work to stop the spread of COVID-19.”

New school case, another death

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza on Friday reported a positive case of COVID-19 at Greenwood Elementary School. Mendoza in a statement said the building and all classrooms will remain open.

“In order for us to move forward as a school district with students and staff in our buildings, our reality is that we will consider each situation on a case-by-case basis,” Mendoza said. “If the situation or situations dictate, we will be prepared to sanitize and disinfect as appropriate, isolate, quarantine, and close classrooms, cohorts, locations, etc.”

Statewide, daily cases of COVID-19 have dropped steadily, returning to levels not consistently seen since before the two-week freeze in mid-November. Oregon has not reported more than 1,000 new daily cases of the disease since Jan. 16, and on Monday, Jan. 25, reported just 435 new cases — the fewest since Oct. 28, 2020.

Nonetheless, public health entities such as the Center for Human Development, Union County’s public health arm, are reminding people that COVID-19 remains a threat and prevention measures are still vital.

“Simply, we need to get our cases and transmission rates down,” CHD said in a statement. “We have been doing a great job as a community in our response over the last difficult year. We know this has been hard on our community and as difficult as it is to say over and over again we need to do our best to continue to consistently put mitigating practices in place as individuals and a community to slow the spread. Keep your distance, wear a mask, restrict your gatherings, wash your hands frequently,

stay home if you’re feeling ill.”

The Oregon Health Authority in a press release revealed the 17th Union County resident to die of the disease was a 61-year-old man who tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday, Dec. 21, and died Friday, Jan. 15, at St. Luke’s Medical Center, Boise.

The 1,171 cases of COVID-19 in Union County had resulted in 17 deaths: a rate of death of about one in every 69.

In all, as of Friday, more than 431,619 Americans had died from COVID-19. Since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the United States on Jan. 21, 2020 — just over a year ago — the nation has accrued an average of 1,154 new COVID-19 deaths every day.

Vaccinations picking up speed

The vaccine rollout in Oregon, like most states in the U.S., was notably slow in the weeks following the emergency use authorizations of both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines. However, that effort has now picked up speed, and

hundreds of thousands of Oregonians have now received at least one of their two doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

“The (local) vaccine roll out has gone smoothly,” CHD said in a statement. “There are still some issues with allocations of vaccine from the state and we ask for our community’s patience as we try to move through this process with what we are being given.... We distributed more than 700 vaccines in the first week and estimate that we will be able to vaccinate that many or more this week with hopes of concluding our Phase 1A groups and beginning to get our Phase 1B Group 1 complete as well.”

As of Thursday, Jan. 28, 359,370 total doses of COVID-19 vaccine had been injected into Oregonians across the state, according to a press release from the Oregon Health Authority.

It remains unclear how much of the population must be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity. However, to fully vaccinate 70% of Oregon’s population of roughly 4,218,000 residents, the state needs

more than 5.9 million doses of vaccine. According to data from the Oregon Health Authority, the state has received an average of approximately 100,000 vaccine doses per week since the first doses arrived on Dec. 16. At that rate, Oregon will have received enough doses to achieve herd 70% vaccination in mid-March 2022.

LMS science teacher Kevin Lair said it felt good to be able to walk around his classroom and observe the progress his students were making on their assignments. This is something he had become accustomed to doing before the pandemic forced all students to learn online.

“I felt like I was teaching again,” Lair said.

He also noted one student accomplished more in one classroom session than the individual would have after several days of online instruction.

LMS social studies teacher Anne Marie Fritz made reference to a term made famous by President Warren Harding in the 1920 presidential campaign when

talking about how glad she was to have students back in her classroom.

“I have a sense of normalcy again,” Fritz said. “The students were gone almost a year. That was way too long.”

Fritz said she did not hate teaching virtually and said it has its good points. However, she said nothing beats having students in a classroom. She said it was easy to see that students were happy to be back even though they were wearing protective masks that obscured their smiles.

“Their eyes were smiling and there was lots of laughter,” Fritz said.

She wanted to give her students hugs and high fives but could not because of social distancing rules. Fritz instead did the next best thing.

“I gave them air hugs and air high fives,” the LMS teacher said.

Union County getting 300 more doses

The limited supply of vaccine doses has caused disruptions in the supply chain since vaccination got underway, most recently when Brown announced that 32,000 doses would be redirected for Portland-area distribution from other parts of the state. Union County will not see a decrease in allocated doses next week, according to OHA Director Pat Allen, who indicated the county will receive 300 doses next week.

Mote vaccinations could be coming nationwide. The Biden administration announced on Tuesday the U.S. intends to purchase an additional 200 million vac-

cine doses from pharmaceutical giants Pfizer and Moderna for the summer of 2021, which could help put the U.S. — and Oregon — on track for herd immunity sooner.

Meanwhile, the slow and steady rollout of existing vaccines continues. Locally, the Center for Human Development opened up vaccination to Phase 1B, group one, this week. That group includes child care workers as well as early learning and K-12 educators and staff. Vaccination also is open to health care workers, long-term care facility staff and residents, and others eligible under Phase 1A.

Wildflower Lodge, for example, has vaccinated roughly half of its staff and residents, including all of the facility’s memory care staff, according to manager Carlene Bolen.

The CHD is offering updates on vaccination and scheduling for eligible groups. To sign up for updates, go to chdinc.org/ subscribe and enter your email address. For more information on Oregon’s statewide vaccine schedule and phasing, go to covid-vaccine.oregon.gov.

SUIT

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attempted first-degree sex abuse and fourth-degree assault in 2018. He pleaded not guilty April 30, 2020, and is awaiting trial.

Smith claims in the lawsuit the defendants retaliated against him after he reported allegations that Abigail Mobley, who still was employed as a deputy at the time, had used illegal drugs and had a sexual relationship with an inmate who was incarcerated for drug crimes to the Oregon Department of Justice on July 31, 2019.

According to DOJ officials, they did not investigate the allegations of drug use, but determined through dozens of recorded jail phone calls that Abigail Mobley was having sexual conversations with former inmate Darren Mortimore. DOJ officials concluded, however, there was not “a reasonable likelihood of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that Ms. Mobley committed the crime of custodial sexual misconduct.”

Grant County Human Resources Manager Laurie Cates said the reason Smith was terminated was conditionally exempt from public disclosure under an Oregon law shielding personnel discipline actions.

A court order prevents Smith from carrying firearms while he awaits trial, but he claims in the suit this was only an excuse to terminate him.

“Defendants claimed that the reason was because (Smith) could not carry a firearm pursuant to the conditions of his release,” the suit states. “However, that reason was false both because there were duties

he could perform without a firearm and because the past practice within the department was to keep persons on administrative leave during the pendency of criminal cases until the criminal cases were resolved.”

Abigail Mobley was on paid administrative leave from March 18, 2019, until she resigned Dec. 26, 2020. During that time, her conduct was investigated by the Oregon Department of Justice and the Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office, but they did not file criminal charges. She also was arrested for driving under the influence of intoxicants and pleaded guilty to enter a diversion program, but she was not ordered not to carry firearms.

The phone

Smith claims in the lawsuit, he came to the conclusion Abigail Mobley was using drugs in 2018, the same year he separated from his spouse, who is a close friend of Zach and Abigail Mobley, and began a relationship with Haley Olson.

A transcript of messages from Olson’s phone show she and Smith discussing his concerns about Mobley.

Idaho law enforcement extracted the contents of Olson’s phone when she was arrested in January 2019, but the charges were dismissed. They also notified Palmer they found Smith’s business card in Olson’s vehicle.

Palmer asked Carpenter to request a copy of the phone extraction, according to a letter provided by Carpenter.

“The information, if applicable, will be used only for internal purposes, and will not be disseminated to any other agencies or third parties,” Carpenter

wrote in a Jan. 30, 2019, letter to the Jerome County, Idaho, prosecutor, who provided him a copy of the extraction.

In an April 10, 2019, letter to Palmer, Carpenter said the extraction contained images, videos and audio files.

“I have reviewed the phone dump to determine whether any actionable evidence exists which could possibly subject Deputy Tyler Smith to discipline or sanction,” Carpenter said. “While no formal review for criminal activity took place, evidence of such is unlikely as the standard for any criminal action would be higher than the review undertaken. I have concluded my review and recommend that you take no action against Deputy Tyler Smith.”

In a Dec. 4, 2019, letter to Olson, Carpenter said he looked at the contents of the extraction but “was not willing to provide the flash drive to the sheriff or any other local agency” and deleted the contents.

Smith claims in the lawsuit that Carpenter provided access to, or described the contents of, the extraction — including sexual content and Smith’s intent to report Abigail Mobley to the DOJ — to others, including Palmer.

“Carpenter provided access to Screenshots of portions of Olson’s phone to Palmer,” the suit states. “Sheriff Palmer showed intimate pictures of (Smith) and Olson to members of the community. The Mobley defendants likewise obtained access to intimate photos of (Smith) and Olson from Palmer and/or Carpenter’s copy of the phone.”

Olson has also filed a federal lawsuit against Grant County, Palmer and Carpenter that is

pending. Carpenter did not respond to emailed questions about that lawsuit, but his attorney has filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit on procedural grounds. Palmer’s attorney said the sheriff “never possessed or reviewed any of the material” Olson alleges, and he has filed a counterclaim for slander against her. Grant County’s attorney said “the county court had no involvement with any of the salacious allegations at issue in the lawsuit.”

The arrest

Smith claims in the new lawsuit that Palmer informed him he was being investigated in late March 2019 because his business card was found in Olson’s vehicle and it could lead to his termination. Smith said he told Carpenter he wished to speak with DOJ regarding the criminal investigation of Abigail Mobley, and Carpenter told Smith he would have DOJ contact him, according to the suit.

Several weeks later, in April or May 2019, Smith claims in the suit, Carpenter told Smith to be patient when Smith informed him again that he had information to report regarding Abigail Mobley.

Smith claims Palmer learned he was going to report Abigail Mobley before June 2019.

“On June 20, 2019,

Defendant Palmer met with (Smith) and berated him for his plan to discuss Deputy (Abigail) Mobley with DOJ,” the suit states. “Defendant Palmer asked (Smith) if he was running his own drug team or actively investigating Deputy (Abigail) Mobley. Deputy Smith said he was doing neither.”

Palmer met with Zach and Abigail Mobley in June 2020, Smith claims in the suit.

“Defendant Palmer instructed (the Mobleys) to destroy all evidence they had in their possession regarding Olson or regarding Deputy (Abigail) Mobley’s misconduct and that they were ‘on their own’ regarding her conduct,” the suit states.

On July 29, 2019, Smith again told Carpenter he needed to speak to DOJ regarding Abigail Mobley, and he was finally interviewed July 31, 2019, and provided “information regarding Deputy (Abigail) Mobley’s criminal activities,” according to the suit. On Aug. 9, 2019, Smith was placed on administrative leave “for unidentified ‘policy violations involving ethical issues,’”

according to the suit. Carpenter said Smith was placed on leave “for issues related to the performance of his duties as a sheriff’s deputy.”

Smith remained on administrative leave until he was discharged. Smith claims in the suit that Palmer and the Mobleys “orchestrated” a plan around August 2019 to get him arrested and forced out of the sheriff’s office.

“The Mobley defendants told (Smith’s spouse), falsely, that (Smith) was going to try to get full custody of their children if she didn’t do something about it immediately,” the suit states. “In response, his wife promptly filed for divorce, emptied her and (Smith’s) joint bank account and, in early September 2019, lodged a criminal complaint against (Smith) for attempted rape. Both the lodging of the criminal complaint and the draining of the bank accounts was done at the recommendation of Grant County employees, including the Mobleys.”

On Sept. 9, 2019, Smith was arrested based on his wife’s complaint. The trial is set to begin April 5.

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