

## VIRUS

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to the CDC, as of Feb. 17, 140 reported COVID-19 deaths have come from children and teenagers younger than 14.

Only 1.3% of the state's confirmed and presumptive COVID-19 cases among children 9 years old or younger required hospitalization, according to the CDC. The state has reported just under 7,000 cases of the virus among children.

### Cases in Union, Wallowa counties

Union County's official number of COVID-19 cases crept up this week to 1,259, an increase of just 10 cases since Monday, Feb. 15. The Oregon Health Authority also reported no new deaths in the county from the virus.

But the La Grande School District on Thursday, Feb. 18, in an email reported in the first two weeks of February, 11 staff and 83 students tested positive for COVID-19, displayed a primary COVID-19 symptom or were identified as a close contact.

"Staff members and students being identified as close contacts cause a largely preventable instability to our operations," according to the message from Superintendent George Mendoza.

He urged parents and guardians to take the following steps to help La Grande schools:

- Keep children home if they show any COVID-19 primary symptoms.
- Contact school nursing staff or a building administrator if you or someone in your household is showing primary symptoms or is a close contact.

- Work to avoid members of your household being within 6 feet of people outside your household for longer than 15 minutes.

Following these steps "to the greatest extent possible," the message stated, would help "limit staff and students being isolated/quarantined and will help keep our schools in operation."

Mendoza also pleaded with families in the district to heed precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including "guiding all members of your family to wear face coverings, wash their hands frequently, cover their coughs and sneezes and avoid contact with people who have signs of illness." He also said members of households need to get plenty of rest, exercise and eat a healthy diet.

Wallowa County had two

new cases of COVID-19 in the Oregon Health Authority's report Wednesday, Feb. 17, which brings the overall total in the county to 139 since the start of the pandemic. There have been 37 cases in the month of February. The rate of infection in the county is now just less than 2%.

### The statewide scene

Oregon added 492 new cases of COVID-19 on Friday, Feb. 19, bringing the state's total to 152,190. The Oregon Health Authority also reported the death toll is 2,149.

There have been more than 755,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine administered, and more than 232,000 people have received both doses for full inoculation.

And most Oregon counties would maintain or improve their COVID-19 risk rating next week, according to preliminary data from the Oregon Health Authority.

Counties won't officially find out where they place on the four tiers of risk level until Tuesday, Feb. 23. The Oregon Health Authority measures COVID-19 cases and positive test percentages each week. Every other week, it uses the numbers to adjust the position of counties on the four-tier risk chart of extreme, high, medium and lower risk.

Each category has different restrictions on businesses and activities.

Malheur County is on track to move from extreme to medium risk and Baker County is maintaining its high risk rating.

But Umatilla, Wallowa, Union, Morrow and Harney counties appear to be maintaining extreme level caseloads.

Wasco County could move from extreme to high risk.

There are a few exceptions to the trend. Douglas County is showing a rise to 271.7 cases per 100,000, a pace that would push it back into extreme risk restrictions.

Lake County continues to be a center of COVID-19 infections, with 1,002.4 cases per 100,000 and a rising infection rate of 19.4%.

Statewide, Oregon has 181.3 cases per 100,000 and a test positive rate of 3.8%.

A full report of the most recent data can be found at [www.oregon.gov/oha/covid19/Documents/DataReports/Weekly-County-Metrics.pdf](http://www.oregon.gov/oha/covid19/Documents/DataReports/Weekly-County-Metrics.pdf).

An interactive map of Oregon showing data and risk levels is at [coronavirus.oregon.gov/Pages/living-with-covid-19.aspx#countystatus](http://coronavirus.oregon.gov/Pages/living-with-covid-19.aspx#countystatus).

— *Other members of the EO Media Group contributed to this report.*

each point, the number of dead bills grows.

Additional deadlines for floor votes, hearings and work sessions in the second chamber and floor votes in the second chamber are all trip-wires for bills to die.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said last week there will be little time left to debate beyond a short list of pandemic-related bills, economic recovery, housing, police reform and the sprawling state budget.

### 2022 election early birds

It's been just a little over three months since the 2020 election, but candidates are starting to pop up for 2022 races.

Sixteen candidate campaign finance committees have been created. Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego, is the biggest name to have a 2022 committee so far. Others include Bud Pierce, who has declared his candidacy for the GOP nomination for the open governor's seat in 2022. Pierce was the 2016 GOP nominee for governor, losing to Brown, who is barred by term limits from seeking another term.

In a separate move,

## MISSION

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once saw people in a car stopped at a red light having their temperatures checked.

People entering Rwanda also face intense screening.

"We had to be tested in the United States five days before we left (for Rwanda) and after we arrived we were quarantined for 24 hours," Matt Gerber said.

This diligence is likely why Rwanda has been ranked first in Africa and sixth globally in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a 2021 story in [Africanews.com](http://Africanews.com), which cites rankings made by the Lowy Institute of Australia.

Rwanda is lauded for its COVID-19 prevention efforts but not the state of its economy.

"The whole country is impoverished," Matt Gerber said.

The nation has a dearth of fundamental medical supplies as a result. Often, Matt Gerber said, Rwandans lack basics, such as bandages.

He said his father was inspired to teach Rwandans how, in the absence of bandages, to cut sheets that can be used to stop bleeding.

To help address this shortage, the Gerbers brought a large assortment of first aid supplies, many donated by people in Union County. The supplies were collected and organized with major help from Lou Gerber's wife, Robin.

"She rallied the community to give donations, which made this a successful venture," said her son Matt.

The CPR and first aid class Lou Gerber taught was in an open air classroom with first responders who handle all types of



Matt Gerber/Contributed photo  
Lou Gerber of La Grande, left, and his son Matt Gerber during their visit to Rwanda in December 2020.

emergencies, including fires, crime and natural disasters.

Lou Gerber, an EMT, made his presentation with the aid of an interpreter who translated his words into Kinyarwanda, Rwanda's national language. Early in his three-hour presentation, the interpreter tapped Gerber on the shoulder.

"She asked me to slow down so that she could catch up to me. When I'm talking about something I'm excited about I start talking too quickly," Gerber said.

Matt Gerber said his father's talk was given in a hot, uncomfortable outdoor setting. Despite this, he said the first responders listened intently throughout.

"These people were so excited," he said. "They were on the edge of their seats."

Sadly, Rwanda is best known to many throughout the world for its horrific civil war of 1994, which was triggered by long-running disputes between the

Hutu and Tutsi tribes. The four-month war claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Rwandans. Rwanda is moving past the war but it still healing, said Matt Gerber, who has made a number of service trips to the nation in recent years.

"It has been rebuilding for the last 26 years," he said.

At the heart of its recovery effort has been the elimination of the tribal affiliations in Rwanda. He said today references to tribes are rarely heard in Rwanda.

Gerber and his father reflected on the 1994 civil war during a visit to the Nyamata Genocide Memorial in Rwanda. The memorial is a former church where 10,000 people locked themselves inside for safety but were killed by attackers. The remains of about 40,000 people killed in the area attack are buried at the site and the interior of the old church has skulls and clothing of the many who died.

"It is a very solemn

place," said Matt Gerber.

Ariella Lorenzen, a filmmaker from Sweden, accompanied the Gerbers on their journey. Lorenzen captured images of some of the work of the father and son team. The party's stops included a two-day, one-night visit to Akagera National Park. The park is a former cattle ranch now home to African wildlife, including hippopotamuses, zebras and elephants.

The party traveled in a vehicle during an unforgettable two days.

"It was the intensity of being in the wild, the thrill of the unexpected. You might see 50 baboon around one corner and a herd of elephants the next," Matt Gerber said.

The presence of hippopotamuses had the trio on alert.

"Hippopotamuses kill more people than lions do," Matt Gerber said. "Even when they are not violent they can crush you by walking over your tent."

To protect themselves from such threats, they spent their night at the park in a solar-powered treehouse that had overnight accommodations.

Matt Gerber, a corporate social responsibility strategist, also spent a portion of his time in Rwanda helping to develop a vocational development program for individuals who want to become seamstresses. He donated two sewing machines and a large amount of sewing items to help get this program started.

The trip to Rwanda was the first for Lou Gerber and the sixth for Matt in the past seven years. Matt Gerber said he hopes he and his father can make similar trips in the future.

"I hope we can start making service trips somewhere in the world every year," he said.

## SHERIFF

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later during my reelection campaign."

Rasmussen blamed the justice department for releasing their "findings" to the public the week before ballots went to Union County voters.

"DOJ did not release the report to me nor did they inform me of their accusations prior to releasing the information to the public. I simply was not able

to refute the allegations before the citizens voted," according to Rasmussen.

The justice department released the report on April 28, 2020, ahead of the May primary election. Rasmussen at the time claimed "the DOJ cleared me."

Redacted and unredacted versions of the report — The Observer obtained both through public records requests — stated the statutes of limitations had run out on any criminal charges Rasmussen may have faced.

Rasmussen in the stipulation also stated, "DPSST was in the process of conducting a fair and objective review of the facts which I believe would benefit me in retaining certification. They appear to be interested in seeking information from full-time current county employees to offset DOJ's lack of interviews with that group of witnesses. However, given what my family and I have been through with an almost-a-year-and-a-half investigation during a cam-

paign, and also that I have started a new career path, I have elected to surrender my certification."

He also remained firm in his stance that he had done nothing wrong.

"I do not believe I have done anything to warrant desertification," he stated in the document. "I am disappointed I can't fully vet out the facts for the policy committee to review."

Rasmussen also stated he was blessed to have worked with tremendous people at the sheriff's office, partner agencies and "the good citizens of Union County." He said he was proud "of the professional office that has been structured the past four terms and the employees we have hired. I know they will continue to serve

the citizens well."

In signing the stipulation to hand over his certifications he waved his right to a hearing or appeal.

Les Hallman, the interim director of the department of public safety standards in training in Oregon, signed the stipulation Jan. 12, and DPSST then revoked the former sheriff's certifications.

Cody Bowen succeeded Rasmussen as sheriff and has been in the office since early January. Bowen had no comment about his former boss and said he is focused on the future of the sheriff's office and improving it and reestablishing trust, if need be, with the community. He also said he remains committed to greater transparency.

## BILLS

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know what districts will look like earlier than late fall at best.

### Legislative logjam

Lawmakers have submitted thousands of new bills and resolutions for the session — with the overwhelming majority headed for the trash bin.

Concern over possible right-wing violence last month and winter storms this month have put the 2021 session behind schedule from the beginning. The Legislature is constitutionally required to adjourn July 1.

Deadlines are starting to loom. Friday, Feb. 19, was the deadline for drafted bills to be sent from staff to lawmakers. The final day that bills can be introduced is Feb. 23. With the exception of bills that go to Rules or Ways and Means committees, bills that don't hit key deadlines automatically die.

Bills must have a work session — when a bill is brought up for a vote by committee — scheduled by March 19. The work session must occur by April 13. At

Ralph Huber, a Springfield private security officer, has filed with the Federal Election Commission to create a fundraising committee to run in the Republican primary in Congressional District 2, a seat held by freshman Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario.

### Exoneration expenses

People who are incarcerated for crimes they did not commit would be eligible for state payments under Senate Bill 499, introduced by Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer.

Oregon is one of 15 states that does not automatically allocate money to someone who is exonerated of a crime they didn't commit. The average allocation in states that do offer aid is \$50,000 per year behind bars, according to the Oregon Innocence Project, which works to clear wrongly convicted people.

The group reported 21 people in Oregon who served nearly 90 years cumulatively in prison have been exonerated in recent years. The bill is in the Senate Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation committee.

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