

VISITS

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after the recent reduction in Union County’s COVID-19 risk rating allowed local assisted care centers to have visitors. He was excited to have the opportunity to embrace his mom. Almost too excited.

Staff at Bullock’s Country Care had to call Shira back as he raced down a hallway because he had forgotten to have his temperature taken, a COVID-19 protocol the state requires of everyone entering an assisted living center. After passing the temperature test, Shira proceeded to his mom’s room, there the two shared an emotional embrace.

“There were tears of joy. I could not be any happier,” Shira said. “I was overwhelmed.”

His mother shared the sentiment of finally being able to see her son in person.

“It was a great surprise,” June Shira said.

She later revealed she had not lost her sense of humor during the pandemic, joking she was mad at her son for not coming to see her inside.

“I told him I was going to paddle him,” June Shira said.

Kirk Shira is one of many people who have been seeing family members at Bullock’s since the improvement in the risk category. Tight restrictions, though, remain on the



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Suzie Bullock, owner of Bullock’s Country Care, La Grande, holds Zizi, on Wednesday, March 17, 2021. The Pomeranian-Chihuahua mix serves as a companion dog to the residents of the care facility.

number of visitors who can be in centers at one time. Bullock’s Country Care, for example, can allow no more than two visitors in the facility at any one time. In addition, visits have to be scheduled in advance. This gives staff time to sanitize between visits. It also prevents the possibility of more than two visitors being at the site at one time, said Suzie Bullock, the owner and operator of the facility.

Bullock said the presence of visitors is creating a feeling of elation among



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Kirk Shira visits with his mother, June Shira, in her residence at Bullock’s Country Care, La Grande, on Wednesday, March 17, 2021. Kirk Shira in the past brought photos of family members to his mother and helped place them along the walls.

her residents.

“They could not be any happier,” she said.

Before guests were allowed in, morale was suffering.

“Depression was through the roof,” Bullock said.

Confusion compounded the heartache from the absence of family members. Bullock said some residents, because of mental health and dementia issues, couldn’t understand why family members were not coming to see them.

“They felt hurt,” Bullock said. “They would say, ‘If

they loved me they would come see me.’”

She said not being able to have visitors during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays was especially difficult. The advertisements on television showing joyful families gathering for the holidays added to the residents’ emotional pain.

“It was rough all the way around,” Bullock said.

Masks have and continue to compound the sense of frustration residents feel, because all staff of assisted living centers must wear masks. Bullock explained many of her residents have hearing issues and rely on lip reading to help them understand what someone is saying to them. Masks, of course, make lip reading impossible. This has meant Bullock has spent much of her time serving as an interpreter, helping residents understand what others are telling residents.

Prior to the pandemic, between 10 and 50 people a day visited Bullock’s Country Care.

“We went from that to nothing,” Bullock said.

She said she hopes the days of 10 to 50 visitors a day return soon. Until then, though, even the smaller number of visitors is a godsend, allowing everyone to again enjoy a sense of anticipation.

“Even though it is nothing like it used to be,” Bullock said, “it is still exciting wondering who will come each day.”

LETTER

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operation of restaurants, gyms and other businesses in the county.

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage shared the sentiments Scarfo and Anderes expressed.

“I feel the time has come where we can go back to local control and work with the community to move forward in a safe way that is good for all of us,” Beverage said.

Anderes said if the state grants counties local control, Union County would be prudent and responsible in how it applies rules.

“We would not blow things open,” Anderes said.

He said Union County has established a good track record in how it has managed COVID-19.

“We have met the goals that have been set,” Anderes said.

He noted when COVID-19 infection rates have gone up, Union County dialed up regulations to more restrictive levels.

Scarfo said Union County officials are in close contact with officials from Grande Ronde Hospital, public health, cities and others about what is happening locally with regard to COVID-19. He said he speaks almost every day with Carrie Brogotti, the public health administrator for the Center for Human Development, La Grande, which oversees much of the county’s response to the pandemic.

The letter the Union County commissioners approved echoes Scarfo’s statements.

“Counties are in a key position to evaluate local conditions such as case counts, positivity rate, local hospital capacity, hospital system capacity, outbreak clusters and available resources,” the letter states, “while also placing those factors in the context of the regional, state and national situation.”

The Oregon Health Authority, as of Friday, March 19, reported the state’s COVID-case total was 160,994 since February 2020 with 2,357 deaths. Union County’s case total stood at 1,345 with 20 fatalities. Wallowa County’s total number of cases was 145 with five fatalities, an increase of one death in each county.

HONOR

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and deputy Jeff Baty went to Portland to retrieve Bridges’ ashes.

Other local law enforcement and emergency vehicles joined them once they arrived in the county for the escort to the home of David and Dolores Bridges.

“He was awesome,” Fish told the Bridges as he and Baty handed over the ashes.

“Bret has been a dispatcher and reserve deputy for about three years,” Fish said later. “He was a very devoted third-shift dispatcher. He never missed a day until this past episode. He didn’t want to take off. He didn’t want to be gone. He was very devoted to his position.”

Bridges lived in Wallowa County since September 2017.

“We invited him,” his father said. “He was living in Colorado at the time and had no family close to him and he accepted our invitation. It brought our family closer together.”

Having previously worked a “help desk” assisting people with computer problems in Colorado, he fit right into

the 911 job.

“He came here and trained for the position after he arrived,” David Bridges said.

A regular graveyard shift dispatcher, it seemed he was “always trying to catch up on his sleep,” Bridges said.

His knowledge of the county came largely from his work with the 911 system.

“He didn’t get out into the community much,” Bridges said.

Bret was, however, a regular with a group of guys who played basketball at Joseph Charter School, Bridges said.

He was also an online gamer.

“We got quite an outpouring of sympathy from the online community,” David said.

In addition to his parents, Bret is survived by a brother in Michigan and a sister in California, as well as several nieces



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

An escort of police and other emergency vehicles arrives Friday, March 12, 2021, at the Joseph home of David and Dolores Bridges bearing the ashes of their son, Bret Bridges, a 911 dispatcher and reserve deputy who died in Portland on March 2 of COVID-19.

“Nothing surprises me in this pandemic. It was a huge blow and a disappointment. It’s truly a terrible disease.”

— David Bridges, whose son Bret was a Wallowa County 911 dispatcher as well as a reserve deputy

COVID-19 vaccine eligibility moves up for many Oregonians

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — More than 1 million new people will be added early to the eligibility list for COVID-19 vaccinations, Gov. Kate Brown announced Friday morning.

President Joe Biden announced on March 11 that he was directing states to lift all eligibility requirements for those 16 and older by May 1.

Oregon did not plan on lifting all eligibility restrictions until July 1.

Oregon officials last week said they were stalling with their phased rollout of eligibility until they received assurances that additional vaccine was coming to the state.

Many parts of the state have been reporting shortages of vaccine and appointment slots for the

ELIGIBILITY TIMELINE

- March 22**
 - Counties that attest to largely completing the vaccination of residents 65 and older may begin vaccinating the next eligible groups.
 - Vaccinations also may begin for migrant and seasonal farmworkers in counties where they are already working.
- March 29**
 - All adults 45-64 with underlying health conditions.
 - Migrant and seasonal farm workers.
 - Seafood and agricultural workers.
 - Food processing workers.
 - People living in low-income senior housing, senior congregate and independent living.
 - Individuals experiencing homelessness.
 - People currently displaced by wildfires.
 - Wildland firefighters.
 - Pregnant people 16 and older.
- April 19**
 - Frontline workers as defined by the CDC.
 - Multigenerational household members.
 - Adults 16-44 with underlying health conditions.
- May 1**
 - All Oregonians 16 and older.

more than 1.3 million people already eligible.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of

Health & Human Services sent a directive to all states that the May 1 date for lifting restrictions was not optional.

OHA Director Pat Allen told state lawmakers on Wednesday that the directive was “binding” and “regulatory,” with non-compliance possibly affecting the shipment of future doses of vaccine to the state.

Brown on Friday ordered many of the 530,000 people covered in the next eligibility group moved up from March 29 to March 22.

OHA Director Pat Allen told state lawmakers on Wednesday that Brown was considering moving up the date as a way to get the groups at least a short head start before opening the eligi-

and nephews.

“He was an uncle to four nieces and nephews and by reports, a very good one,” David Bridges said.

He said he expects that when their daughter and other son are able to join the parents, together they’ll spread Bret’s ashes somewhere.

“I presume there’ll be a celebration of life, but that’ll be decided in the future,” David Bridges said.

He said he has no idea how his son contracted the virus. He used to regularly do shopping for his parents, but was always careful.

“He was conscientious about wearing a mask when out,” his father said.

He said Bret was first hospitalized at Wallowa Memorial Hospital for a week before being transferred to Tri-Cities for a week and then to Portland. He said it both was and was not a surprise that his son fell ill.

Bridges said he never was told by a medical professional what the “underlying conditions” that contributed to his son’s death were. To his knowledge, Bridges said, his son was healthy other than being overweight.

“Nothing surprises me in this pandemic,” David Bridges said. “It was a huge blow and a disappointment. It’s truly a terrible disease.”

Under Brown’s new timeline, vaccinations can begin for migrant and seasonal farmworkers in counties where they are currently already working.

People age 45-64 with underlying health conditions can get vaccinated in counties that can attest they have “largely” vaccinated those age 65 and older.

The Oregon Health Authority did not have additional information on what standards were required to meet that threshold.

OHA also said it did not have a list of counties that currently meet the standard.

Another 550,000 people who were to be eligible on May 1 have had their start date moved to April 19.