

Oregon health officials work to shrink vaccine disparity

State epidemiologist says social gatherings led to recent outbreaks

By **SUZANNE ROIG**
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SALEM — The Oregon Health Authority will deploy vaccination vans to hard-to-reach communities as a way to eliminate the disparities created between those with easy access to COVID-19 vaccines and those facing barriers.

This comes at a time when daily case counts of COVID-19 have more than doubled in just over a month, Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Oregon Health Authority state epidemiologist, said Friday at a press conference.

As of Friday, April 16, Oregon had 173,626 COVID-19 cases, Sidelinger said. On March 6 the seven-day average number of cases was 249, but now the daily average is 595 cases.

COVID-19 cases have increased more than 20% for each of the past three weeks, Sidelinger said. With such high case counts, more counties have shifted from lower risk levels to more restrictive levels. At the end of March, 28 counties were in the lower to moderate risk tiers. On Friday there were 22 counties listed as lower or moderate risk.

“We’re all tired of fighting COVID-19,”



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin, File

Kerry Gillette, a physician assistant with Mosaic Medical, Bend, fills syringes with the Moderna vaccine during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Bethlehem Inn in Bend on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021. The Oregon Health Authority on Friday, April 16, 2021, announced it will deploy vaccination vans to hard-to-reach communities.

Sidelinger said. “Tired of wearing our masks. Tired of missing our loved ones. And tired of keeping our distance. But we must all continue to fight.”

Sidelinger highlighted three social gatherings that caused recent outbreaks: a multi-night karaoke event that caused 36 people to test positive, hospitalized three and left one person dead; a small indoor concert that caused 15 people to test positive for COVID-19; and a backyard gathering where all 10 people who attended tested positive for COVID-19.

Since December, 3 in 4 seniors 65 and older have been vaccinated. Starting Monday, April 19, anyone 16 and older can sign up for a vaccination.

Oregon Health Authority data highlights a vaccine disparity between white Oregonians and Latinos in particular.

About 75% of Oregonians are white but white people account for 50% of COVID-19 cases and 71% of vaccinations. About 13% of Oregonians are Hispanic or Latino, but they make up 25% of COVID-19 cases and account for 6% of vaccinations.

A driver in the vaccine disparity is that Latinos in Oregon tend to be younger and often don’t work in the kind of jobs that had early access to vaccines.

The state has sent additional vaccines to federally qualified health centers, targeted migrant workers and worked with 170 community partners, and still access hasn’t been balanced, said Patrick Allen, Oregon Health Authority director, at a press conference Friday. Because it’s not enough, vans will be

sent out to rural communities to vaccinate those interested, Allen said.

“As a state we can and need to do better,” Allen said. “Vaccinations in Oregon have not been administered as equitably as they need to be. The numbers are stark and clear. For too many people race and income are predictors of whether you can access a COVID-19 vaccine or not.”

Vaccine disparity is a national issue that cannot rely upon just a speedy

rollout of vaccine delivery systems such as through the Oregon Convention Center, the Salem fairgrounds or the Deschutes County Fair & Expo Center, although they play an important role, Allen said. The vans will enable the vaccines to get to communities directly.

As of Thursday, 1.5 million Oregonians received at least one dose of the vaccine. But because of concerns about rare blot clots, the state has halted the use of the one-

dose Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. Earlier in the week, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urged states to temporarily stop using the vaccine given to 6.8 million people after six women who received the vaccine became seriously ill and one died.

That halt means Oregon will have 70,000 fewer vaccines available each week, Allen said.

— Oregon Capital Bureau reporter Gary A. Warner contributed to this

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OSU names new interim president, first woman in role

Associated Press

CORVALLIS — Oregon State University’s Board of Trustees confirmed the university’s new interim president.

Becky Johnson, confirmed Friday, April 16, is currently the vice president of OSU Cascades — the university’s Bend campus, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported. She will resign from that position to step into her role leading the entire university.

Johnson was nominated through a two-week process in which the board solicited input from the OSU faculty, students and staff, as well as outside stakeholders and community members. She will be the university’s first female president.

Johnson has worked at Oregon State since 1984 when she began as an associate professor in the college of forestry. She will serve as president starting in May for about a year, or until a permanent president is selected.

At the Friday meeting, Johnson discussed challenges of the past year including the pandemic, ongoing violence spurred from systemic racism, “and of course, our own university presidential situation caused disruption, significant hurt and awareness of interpersonal violence that impacts many in our community and society.”

She replaces former OSU President F. King Alexander, who resigned last month after reports of mishandled sexual misconduct at his previous university — Louisiana State.

Johnson said rebuilding the trust many felt Alexander broke will be a large part of her job.

“I think it starts with listening and building relationships across campus,” she said. “And really being committed to shared governance as we move forward with decisions and actions from the university.”

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