

Biden, Brown shift vaccine doses to where demand is high

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

Hoping to pick up the pace of vaccinations, state and federal health officials are ditching their population-based distribution game plans to get more doses where they are wanted and needed.

President Joe Biden wants 70% of American adults fully vaccinated by July 4. The goal translates to about 160 million people. Currently, 105 million American adults are fully vaccinated.

To get there, Biden announced Tuesday, May 4, that he was ending the system that sent weekly shipments of vaccine to states in amounts based on their population.

The move will send more vaccine to places where demand is high, with additional supply drawn from areas where vaccine sits unused in medical refrigerators.

Allotments to states that do not want or cannot use more vaccine will go into a federal "vaccine bank." States where shots are in demand will be able to order up to 50% more than their current allotments.

Oregon's infection rate No. 1 in U.S.

Oregon, California and Michigan are among states saying they still need more vaccine to meet demand. On the flip side, West

Virginia has reported a surplus of vaccine and Arkansas officials said the state no longer wants weekly shipments.

With Oregon one of 12 states seeing an increase in COVID-19 cases, the state plans to withdraw from the vaccine bank quickly.

"Oregon will ask for the maximum allowed, which will help us to get shots in arms faster," Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday.

On April 27, Oregon's infection rate had grown by 53% over the previous two weeks, the highest mark in the nation.

COVID-19 infections are still rising in Oregon, but more slowly. Cases have risen only 12% over the past two weeks. Oregon's 33% increase in hospitalizations over the same time is the third highest in the nation, behind Alaska and Kansas.

Nationwide, the infection rate is down 26% in the past two weeks.

The strongest piece of positive news came at the end of April, when Oregon recorded its fewest COVID-19 deaths in a month since the beginning of the crisis in March 2020. Oregon currently has the fifth lowest death rate per 100,000 people in the United States. Alaska, Vermont, Hawaii and Idaho have lower rates.

'Vaccine hesitancy' high in Oregon

The Oregon Health Authority

reported Thursday that just under 37% of state residents age 16 and older were fully vaccinated. Another 15% have had one shot and have scheduled their second dose.

Just as there are states that eagerly desire the vaccine while others shun it, counties in Oregon show the same pattern.

Vaccination rates of residents 16 and older have varied widely across the 36 counties, from 64% in Benton and Hood River counties to less than 32% in Lake, Umatilla and Malheur counties.

That's led to shifting more vaccine to areas where it is in demand, including Portland.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock told the East Oregonian that some of the reasons for the low turnout to get shots were political.

Though ex-President Donald Trump was vaccinated, some see vaccination refusal as an extension of the opposition to Brown's orders closing businesses that angered many in the area.

"The polling seems to show older Republican men seem to be the group who least likely want to get the vaccination," Murdock said. "But I'm an absolute contrast to that. I'm old, I'm a Republican and I couldn't wait to get mine fast enough."

Oregon has the highest rate of "vaccine hesitancy" on the West Coast, with 15% of residents saying they are unsure or don't

want to get the shots, according to a report this week from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In contrast, California and Washington are reporting about 11% of the population is unsure or doesn't want to be inoculated. California officials said the highest rates of negative response were in the northern tier of rural counties nearest the Oregon border.

Oregon also has dealt with what OHA Director Pat Allen has called "vaccine belligerency," an active opposition to not only being inoculated, but at times protesting those who choose to get the vaccine. Incidents have included the heckling by anti-vaccination hardliners of Bend high school students at a school-sponsored clinic.

More steps to increase vaccinations

Other steps are being taken to get more "impulse vaccinations" by offering shots without appointments. Many people across the country and in Oregon have expressed frustration with multiple, sometimes clunky websites required to make appointments. Now, it's possible to just show up and roll up a sleeve.

Both federal and state health officials have said that they will also increasingly find ways to get vaccine to people instead of

people to the vaccine. This will include mobile clinics, pop-up sites and vaccination days at major employers.

Over the entire pandemic that began in China on Dec. 31, 2019, Oregon has had the third lowest per capita number of cases in the nation, at 4,432 per 100,000. Though the rise in infections has been sharp, Oregon's long-standing place near the bottom of cases and deaths means that its per capita number of cases pushed it no higher than 12th place.

Oregon was among about a half dozen states with the lowest infection and death rates over the course of the pandemic. Just over 2,500 deaths were reported by Oregon out of the more than 575,000 deaths in the U.S.

Biden said Tuesday he hoped the more people see the vaccine curbing COVID-19, the more he hopes they will change their minds and be inoculated, if not for themselves, then for family and friends.

"I think the end of the day, most people will be convinced by the fact that their failure to get the vaccine may cause other people to get sick and possibly die," Biden said.

There is no vaccine approved for children. Pfizer announced it will ask for federal approval for emergency use of its vaccine on children as young as 2. The company said the approval could come as early as next week.

Bipartisan bill would bar party bosses from holding office

Sens. Bill Hansell, Lynn Findley say concerns from constituents prompted bill

By CARISA CEGAUSKE
The News-Review via AP StoryShare

SALEM — A newly proposed bill would bar state Sen. Dallas Heard, R-Myrtle Creek, from holding office in the Oregon Republican Party while simultaneously serving as a state elected official.

The bill's sponsors argued there are potential conflicts of interest involved in holding both party and legislative positions, but Heard told The

News-Review the bill would take away the rights of the people to choose their leaders for both party and Legislature.

"Why should the people have the person they've chosen to serve them in either position ripped away from them through no choice of their own, but through the choice of a few elitists up in Salem from both parties?" Heard said.

Two of Heard's fellow Republicans, Sens. Bill

Hansell of Athena and Lynn Findley of Vale, introduced Senate Bill 865 on Wednesday, May 5, along with Democratic Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner of Lake Oswego.

The bill would also impact state Sen. Dennis Linthicum, R-Klamath Falls, who is the treasurer of the Republican Party. In addition to legislators, the bill would bar governors, Supreme Court justices and other elected state officials from becoming office holders of any political party.

Elected officials who

violated the rule would be charged \$250 per day.

Heard has been chairperson of the Oregon Republican Party, which is a separate entity from the Legislature, since February.

Heard has been at the center of controversy at the state Capitol more than once over the past year, especially over COVID-19 safety restrictions.

In March, he pledged to vote "no" on every bill until the Capitol building

was reopened to the public.

In December, he removed his mask on the Senate floor, to protest COVID-19 safety rules.

During a protest at the state Capitol on Jan. 6, in which demonstrators called for the building to reopen to the public, Heard had this to say about state leaders as he gestured to the state Capitol.

"Don't let any of these punks from that stone temple over there ever tell you they are better than

any of you. Trust me, I work with these fools. None of them are half as good as any of you and you need to bring the power to them," he said.

OPB reported Hansell and Findley said in a joint statement they had been contacted by constituents who were concerned about mixing party politics with legislative policy.

There's no guarantee SB 865 will pass, but if it does Heard said he would challenge it on principle.



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