

## MASK

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guidance, she said, rather than worrying about verifying vaccination status.

“Oregonians now have a choice of how to protect themselves and others from COVID-19: either get vaccinated, or continue wearing a mask and following physical distancing requirements,” Brown said.

Suzannah Moore-Hemann, executive director of the Union County Chamber of Commerce, said the new less stringent regulations are an indication that the nation is moving in the right direction in terms of the pandemic.

“I think it definitely shows there is progress being made,” Moore-Hemann said.

Moore-Hemann also said the new guidance will help the local economy by making people feel more comfortable about going into stores and attending events.

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage is also pleased with the decision.

“I am happy about the new guidance. It is a good way to start the summer,” Beverage said.

John Howard, the owner John J. Howard & Associates, a La Grande business, echoes Beverage’s sentiment.

“It’s a new day and a huge step toward getting back to a normal way of life,” Howard said.

“We have all longed for this moment — when we can get back to some sense of normalcy,” Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said at an earlier White House briefing.

The CDC and the Biden administration have faced pressure to ease restrictions on fully vaccinated people — those who are two weeks past their last required COVID-19 vaccine dose — in part to highlight the benefits of getting the shot. The country’s aggressive vaccination campaign has paid off: U.S. virus cases are at their lowest rate since September, deaths are at their lowest point since last April, and the test positivity rate is at the lowest point since the pandemic began.

Walensky said the long-awaited change is thanks to the millions of people who have gotten vaccinated and is based on the latest science about how well those shots are working.

“Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities — large or small — without wearing a mask or physically distancing,” Walensky said. “If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic.”

The new guidance is likely to open the door to confusion, since there is no surefire way for businesses or others to distinguish between those who are fully vaccinated and those who are not.

“Millions of Americans are doing the right thing and getting vaccinated, but essential workers are still forced to play mask police for shoppers who are unvaccinated and refuse to follow local COVID safety measures,” said Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. “Are they now supposed to become the vaccination police?”

Walensky and Biden said people who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks indoors.

“We’ve gotten this far — please protect yourself until you get to the finish line,” Biden said, noting that most Americans younger than 65 are not yet fully vaccinated. He said the government was not going to enforce the mask wearing guidance on those not yet fully vaccinated.

“We’re not going to go out and arrest people,” added Biden, who said he thinks the American people want to take care of their neighbors. “If you haven’t been vaccinated, wear your mask for your own protection and the protection of the people who also have not been vaccinated yet.”

On Capitol Hill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she is not changing the rules requiring masks on the House floor.

“No,” Pelosi told CNN.

“Are they all vaccinated?” Recent estimates have put the percentage of unvaccinated lawmakers in the House at 25%.

That ambiguity over who is and isn’t vaccinated led Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University, to declare the CDC guidance “confusing and contradictory.”

“The public will not feel comfortable in a crowded indoor space if they are unsure if the maskless person standing next to them is or is not vaccinated,” he said.

The announcement came as many states and communities have already been lifting mask mandates amid improving virus numbers and as more Americans have been shedding face coverings after getting shots.

To date more than 154 million Americans, nearly 47% of the population, have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and nearly 119 million are fully vaccinated. The rate of new vaccinations has slowed in recent weeks, but with the authorization Wednesday of the Pfizer shot for children ages 12 to 15, a new burst of doses is expected in the coming days.

“All of us, let’s be patient, be patient with one another,” Biden said, acknowledging some Americans might be hesitant about removing their masks after more than a year of living in a pandemic that has killed more than 584,000 people in the U.S. and more than 3.3 million people worldwide.

— *The Observer contributed to this report.*

## ANIMALS

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for domestic complaints and serving court summons to residents of the county, but like all small community law enforcement officers, she wears multiple hats. She also is one of three medical examiners for the county.

Jones entered Union to respond to a follow-up regarding a loose dog the city ordinance officer saw wandering the night before — a problem pit bull dog that had killed seven cats from three separate households the week before. A woman with a child entered their yard and spoke with Jones about the dog.

Jones said her primary goal is to educate pet owners, especially those with unruly dogs, about ways to minimize harm in the community.

“When I go out, not only do I warn them, I also educate them and say, ‘How can I help you be a better dog owner?’” Jones said.

She noted the pit bull, which frequently gets loose, should be tethered and offered to acquire the tethers and leashes if the owners are unable to afford one.

“We take it seriously because these dogs have the potential to bite a human, and it’s our responsibility to keep the citizens safe,” Jones said.

The deputy said the household had received a citation for their dog only a week prior.

“When a dog kills a domestic animal, or bites a person, we put them on — I call it ‘doggy probation.’ In short, it’s an aggressive level two probationary period, so that if the dog does anything else in one year, we could take the animal and possibly euthanize it.”

It’s a last resort, certainly, but a necessary final step when animals continue to remain uncontrolled and dangerous to the community. Jones said she prefers education and assistance to hardline approaches that would upset pet owners and could lead to violent confrontation.

Before leaving, Jones gave the woman an extra collar from the back of her vehicle. The resident was thankful, noting the pit bull had a tendency to break free from his collar.

### Finding the right fit

Deputy Kelly sifted through a stack of civil



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Union County sheriff’s deputy Patricia Kelly speaks to a La Grande resident Wednesday, May 12, 2021, while two barking dogs that a neighbor had complained about race through the yard.

service papers inside her police vehicle while at a mobile home park along Riddle Road in La Grande when a man walked up to discuss his neighbor’s barking dogs. She has been on the sheriff’s payroll only since August 2020, but the community is starting to recognize her as one of the two animal enforcement officers.

Kelly began her law enforcement career working as a correctional officer and obtained the rank of sergeant. She took a pay cut to become an animal enforcement officer.

“I didn’t know if I’d like it,” Kelly said. “I had trained dogs and worked with horses, so I figured I’d probably be good at it. As Lani was training me, I ended up loving it. I’m much happier.”

A stuffed dog doll hung in the windshield of Kelly’s patrol vehicle — a gift from Jones after Kelly finished her probation period and was able to work solo as a deputy with Union County.

“The things I love in life, and my background,” she said, “it kind of brings it all together.”

Kelly recently moved to the area and is learning the local streets. But other parts of the job are harder.

She recalled a resident who suffered through severe drug addiction. The deputy hoped eventually, with treatment and time, the person would recover. It has not happened. She also remembered assisting Jones with a blood extraction from a dead resident for evidence and autopsy purposes.

“It was hard in the beginning, because I felt, ‘Why are you all so happy, don’t you see this stuff happening around here?’ And

you want them to see that,” Kelly said. “Not everybody can handle this, not everybody can do this job.”

Still, being one of the few women at the sheriff’s office has its advantages, Kelly said, such as handling situations involving children.

“I’ve had so many good interactions with children,” Kelly said, “and being able to do that kind of police work is so much better.”

### Seasonal problems

Jones noted many of the calls she and Kelly respond to involve dogs, from barking pups that irritate neighbors to pets left in cars while the owners go shopping or run errands. Education, she said, is paramount.

“It seems simple to me,” Jones said. “If it’s hot outside, don’t take your dog with you.”

But many do, she said. As she explained summer months create potentially fatal hazards for pets in vehicles, a call came across the radio about two small dogs inside a pickup in the Walmart parking lot in Island City.

“A dog can’t sweat, so they have the potential to overheat quickly,” she said. “We get a lot of these calls.”

She arrived to see the two small dogs in a vehicle with all four windows cracked open. The day was not too warm, but she verified the internal temperature of the vehicle as a precaution, using a handheld laser. It registered just under 90 degrees. While not entirely dangerous to the dogs inside, she left her card on the driver’s door with her number and the request for a phone call.

Each season has its own

challenges, Jones said. Winter brings increased calls about animals left outside in the cold or neglected livestock, and spring and summer come with increased calls for dog bites. She attributed the pattern to increased activity as more people are out enjoying the weather and walking their dogs.

She also said with summer, there is an increase in wolf attacks.

### Here to help

“Animal-related stuff — people are really emotional about their animals — are truly one of the most volatile calls that you will ever go on,” Jones said. “If you say you’re going to take their animal away, it is almost as bad as telling them you’re going to take their children.”

Jones underscored that even simple noise complaints about barking dogs can quickly escalate into fiascos. She recalled a shooting on Tuesday, May 11, that left two deputies dead in Eden, Texas. They had responded to a call about a dog complaint that ended with gunfire, the deaths of the deputies and a critical injury to a city employee.

But most situations involving animals result in level-headed discussions and an opportunity to educate the public about animal control and the role the deputies play in keeping the community safe.

“One time I went to a call and there was a 5-year-old little girl that was inside the gate, and she put her little hands on her hips and she said, ‘My mom says that you go to people’s houses and steal their dogs!’” Jones said. “And I said, ‘Oh no, honey, we help animals.’”

## PARK

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insects to help spread the pollen other plants need to reproduce.

The volunteer said she wants to continue having native plants at the site because many are excellent pollinator plants and she wants people to learn about and appreciate them.

One of the advantages of having a park filled

with plants native to the region is they are easier to care for because they are used to the soils in the region and its relatively dry conditions. Having native plants present, Boula said, will help the pollinator garden become self-sustaining.

Boula said the work that has been done to transform Reynolds Park is a credit to the many who have helped her, including La Grande’s parks depart-

ment, La Grande Main Street, the Blue Mountains Conservancy and the local chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon.

Spence said his department assisted with steps that included removing weeds and debris and adding new benches, but he emphasized Boula has been the driving force throughout the revival of the park.

“She did most of the work,” Spence said.

Today, Boula is scaling back her work at Reynolds Park because she is moving from La Grande to Cove, which will make it harder for her to care for the pocket park. Boula is preparing a volunteer to assist her with caring for the native plant site.

Anyone interested in volunteering with the pollinator garden project should contact Lorrie McKee at l.mckee@cityoflagrande.org.



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