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FRONTLINE FATIGUE



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Grande Ronde Hospital house supervisor Danita Thamert speaks with other emergency room workers in the hospital's intensive care unit on Monday, Aug. 30, 2021.

Grande Ronde Hospital nurses, staff cope with life during COVID-19

By ANDREW CUTLER
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Danita Thamert, like many other health care professionals, believed the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines earlier this year would put the darkest days of the pandemic behind her.

Thamert, a registered nurse at Grande Ronde Hospital, said that when cases were down this summer and a sense of normalcy was in the air, tired hospital staff who had been on the front lines of the pandemic for more than a year were hopeful the worst was over. Now, with the delta variant cutting a wide swath through the unvaccinated population in Union County, a weary hospital staff struggles to keep going.

“So many of the nurses are disheartened and discouraged. We were all excited. It was like, OK, we can unmask, we can go on about our business and have some semblance of normal,” said Thamert, who has worked at Grande Ronde for nearly 36 years.

As the virus continues to gain ground, it is taking a toll on front line medical workers, including Thamert.

“The stress is amazing,” she said. “We try to encourage the nurses to

go get a massage, just go relax and do something on your days off.”

Grande Ronde Hospital is a 25-bed critical access hospital with 12 outpatient clinics. Having the critical access hospital designation means, among other things, that the La Grande facility’s average length of stay is 96 hours or less for acute care patients. During normal times, Thamert said, that was easy for the hospital staff to accomplish.

These aren’t normal times.

“I had a physician call 39 hospitals before we got a patient out where he needed to be, with the services that we didn’t offer that that patient needed,” Thamert said. “And in the meantime, we’re trying to do the best we can for these patients.”

There are only so many medical personnel to go around at Grande Ronde Hospital, Thamert said, and that too adds a level of complexity to the COVID-19 impact.

“I’ve got a full ICU, everybody knows it. So, OK, I can come in for a little while. There goes your release day, the day that you can rejuvenate and recharge. It makes our job more stressful,” she said.

Dealing with uncertainty, Thamert said, clouds the day-to-day work of hospital staff.

“As we continue on this journey, it’s

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Manufacturing, hospitality among worst hit industries

Editor’s Note: This is the third in a five-part series by EO Media Group looking at the issue of the lack of workers for jobs in Central and Eastern Oregon — why workers are not returning to previously held jobs and how businesses are pivoting to function without being fully staffed.

By JAYSON JACOBY, SAMANTHA O’CONNOR and ALEX WITTEWER
EO Media Group

BAKER CITY — Tyler Brown’s family owns one restaurant in Baker

City that hasn’t served a meal since before the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Baker County.

But the Browns’ challenges to keep enough workers to run their two other restaurants are so daunting that they can’t begin to plan the reopening of the closed business.

That’s the Sumpter Junction

Worker Shortage



THIRD IN A 5-PART SERIES

restaurant, off Campbell Street near Interstate 84. The Browns closed the restaurant in March 2020. Inside rest the memories of customers who once frequented the restaurant, told quietly by a single butter knife resting on the edge of a booth table.

A newsstand is stacked high with Baker City Herald issues blaring the headline “Coronavirus Closures.” They’re dated March 14, 2020. It was three days before Gov. Kate Brown banned dining inside restaurants. It was the last paper delivered to Sumpter Junction.

During much of the rest of that year, and continuing into 2021, the number of customers at Baker County’s various restaurants was limited due to the county’s COVID-19 risk level.

Those restrictions meant it wasn’t feasible to reopen Sumpter Junction, Tyler Brown said.

Risk levels and restaurant limits ended June 30, but Brown said it remains a struggle to keep a sufficient workforce to operate Barley

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

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	44 LOW		56/42
	A few showers		Cloudy, showers

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page 4A.



TUESDAY

TIRED OF DRY CHICKEN? TRY SOME THIGHS

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