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COVID-19 CRISIS

'It's like a big game of chicken'

Eastern Oregon may see exodus of health workers after vaccine mandate kicks in

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Eastern Oregon's health care system could see a mass exodus of workers come Oct. 18, the deadline for Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

More than a quarter of all health care workers in Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties remain unvaccinated, according to the Oregon Health Authority. All would be fired or forced to resign under the mandate.

"It's like a big game of chicken," said Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County's public health officer. "Who's going to relent first?"

Hospitals across the three counties say they are working to comply with the mandate, but none would disclose any specific plans for how they would adjust or alter operations if there is a shortage of workers.

"We understand this new requirement has been welcomed by some and has caused great concern for others," said Mardi Ford, spokesperson for Grande Ronde hospital in La Grande. "While we value every one of our employees and support their right to make that choice; as a private, not-for-profit Critical Access Hospital, we must follow this government directive to continue caring for our community. We do not want to lose a single member of our team."

Regional hospital officials in recent months have said they already were struggling with a shortage of workers. Staff have said they are exhausted after the delta variant ripped through the region, hospitalizing large swaths of unvaccinated people. In Umatilla County, the unvaccinated have accounted for about 49 out of every 50 hospitalizations this year, according to county data.

Hitzman said he's concerned a mass layoff would only exacerbate the problems the health care system is facing during the latest pandemic surge.

"It's going to have a massive impact on the system," said Hitzman, a vocal vaccine

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Corban McNeil surveys a group of fellow students in a game of "dart frog," attempting to identify one as the poisonous amphibian taking out the rest of the class during the Leopards Club after-school program at Cove Charter School on Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021.

Off to a promising start

Cove Elementary after-school program serving as pilot project

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

COVE — Sometimes less is more, a thought that likely entered the minds of some Cove Elementary School students recently as they tested mini trampolines after school.

The children are part of a new after-school program, the Leopards Club. The group had just created mini trampolines with boxes and rubber bands. Ping-Pong balls were then tossed onto the trampolines to see how far or high they bounced. Some students were surprised to see that the trampolines with a large number of rubber bands overlapping one another had less spring than those with fewer ones.

The reason was not mysterious.

"The trampolines with a lot of rubber bands were more rigid," said Lacey Baird, the instructor for Leopards Club members in kindergarten through second grade and a substitute teacher in the Cove School District.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Instructor Lacey Baird reads aloud to students at Cove Charter School during the Leopards Club after-school program on Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021.

"A number of people told me they thought there was a need for after-school activities for children."

Earl Pettit, Cove School District superintendent

The trampolines are one many items being created during a two-week Inventor Workshop phase of the new Cove Elementary School after-school program. On Tuesday, Sept. 14, students created mini aqueducts after learning how

the Romans constructed them more than 2,000 years ago. Leopards Club members, using straws and gravity, devised creations that transferred several cups of water from one container to another over a distance of about 2 feet.

The after-school sessions, all free, run for about two hours Monday through Thursday and will continue throughout the school year. Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit got the program started in part because of community input.

"A number of people told me they thought there was a need for after-school activities for children," Pettit said.

Cove is operating a program provided by Right At School, an Evanston, Illinois, company that provides after-school enrichment programs. Cove's after-school program is a pilot project for Right At School. Pettit said normally the company runs its after-school program by itself, providing its own teachers and doing all the necessary work with little school district help. Right At School also charges families of students in the program about \$100 for every two-week session they attend.

Right At School is providing the Cove School District total autonomy in running its program as a pilot project. Right At School sends activity materials and provides curriculum for teachers and advice but nothing else.

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School districts grappling with exceptions

Protocol not set for school staff who receive exception to vaccine requirement

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — An individualized approach will be used by the La Grande School District when establishing protocols for employees who

choose not to be vaccinated before the state-ordered Oct. 18 deadline and instead opt out for a medical or religious exception.

Building administrators throughout the school district will be meeting with staff members who have been granted exceptions to determine what steps they will have to take to protect them and best address their individual needs, according to Scott Carpenter, the La Grande

School District's assistant superintendent.

"Employees will be provided with options to protect their safety and provide flexibility," he said.

Options will likely include regular testing for COVID-19, wearing masks that provide extra protection and daily screenings that could involve temperature checks.

Carpenter said it is not known yet how many employees have been vac-

inated for COVID-19 or will seek religious or medical exceptions. Employees have been asked by the school district to indicate by Oct. 4 whether they are vaccinated or will seek an exception.

"We want to know everyone's intentions by Oct. 4 so that we can plan our future," said La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza.

The Union School Dis-

trict will also have a similar protocol in place for employees who are granted an exception from a COVID-19 vaccination.

"We will be developing plans on a case-by-case basis," said Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells. "We want to create a comfortable and safe environment that our staff members approve of."

The Cove School District
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La Grande, Oregon

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