

COVID-19 action plan set to ramp up vaccine requirements

Biden’s nationwide action plan impacts organizations with over 100 employees

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — With COVID-19 mandates on the way in October, implications are reaching the local level.

President Joe Biden announced a six-pronged COVID-19 action plan on Sept. 9, with the hopes of combatting the rising nationwide COVID-19 numbers. The plan requires all employers with 100 or more employees to require COVID-19 vaccinations or conduct weekly testing.

“This applies to all organizations across the board to all employees and organizations over 100,” La Grande City Manager Robert Strope said. “It does have the provision for a negative test, so that’s the biggest difference that I’m seeing in this.”

The city of La Grande is one organization that falls under the umbrella of the action plan, which was previously not impacted by mandates implemented

nated or report a negative COVID-19 test on a weekly basis.

“It clearly will apply to the city’s full-time employees,” Strope said. “Whether it applies to part-time employees or seasonal employees, we’ll just have to wait for the rule to come out to determine that for us.”

Strope noted that the city is currently accumulating vaccination stats among city employees.

“That’s something that we’re in the process of gathering in anticipation of this,” he said.

At the county level, it is not known if the Biden COVID-19 action plan will apply to Union County, which has at least 200 employees, said Donna Beverage, a member of the Union County Board of Commissioners.

“We are waiting to find out if it applies to us,” Beverage said. “There are a lot of unknowns.”

Sheriff Cody Bowen echoed the same sentiment, noting that he has not heard from the county regarding the action plan, but that he believes they are exploring some options.

Large businesses impacted by plan

A major implication of the action plan at the local level will be the rules for businesses with 100 or more employees.

Prior to the COVID-19 action plan, Union Pacific already required all employees to wear face coverings in work locations regardless of vaccination status. According to the Union County Economic Development Corporation, Union Pacific employs 250 workers in La Grande.

Outdoors RV Manufacturing declined to comment on the action plan’s impacts, but the company employs approximately 150. Boise Cascade (500), Union Pacific Railroad (250) and Wal-Mart (250) are three of the largest employers in the county affected by the action plan. According to the Oregon Health Authority’s COVID-19 outbreak reports, Wal-Mart had a 12-person outbreak that was initially investigated on Sept. 1 and experienced an outbreak most recently on Sept. 9.

The Biden action plan emphasizes an increase in

testing availability, as well as providing paid time off for employees to get vaccinated or recover if they experience symptoms from the shot.

The Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration is developing the rule and will issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to put the new requirement in place.

The action plan’s points of emphasis are vaccinating the unvaccinated, further protecting the vaccinated, keeping schools safely open, increasing testing and requiring masking, protecting economic recovery and improving care for those with COVID-19.

Union County tallied over 600 positive COVID-19 cases in September and is up to 134 cases in October as of Oct. 11.

Previous mandates

Several large employers in Union County have already been subject to vaccine mandates, either from the state or internal decisions.

Grande Ronde Hos-

pital employs over 700 employees, providing health care services across the region. The hospital, as well as local school districts, fell under Gov. Brown’s vaccine mandate that was issued in late August.

Unlike Biden’s action plan, the statewide mandates do not offer an option for weekly testing.

Eastern Oregon University announced its own vaccine requirement in June for students and staff on campus, but will likely fall under the federal mandate.

The deadline for receiving the vaccination or filing a medical or religious exemption for students and employees is Oct. 22. The university’s human resources department handles employee exemptions, while student affairs coordinates with the student health center to handle student exemptions.

Eastern Oregon’s school year officially began Sept. 20, with classes beginning Sept. 27. According to the University’s COVID-19 dashboard, the current vaccination rate among students is 63.7% and the percentage of vaccinated employees is 81.5%.

FOOD

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Null and the program’s board are thankful for the hardworking volunteers, but COVID-19 created difficulty in keeping that effort alive.

“We didn’t know if we wanted to take the chance of meeting,” Null said. “Our volunteer pool is building back up again. We’re starting to see a lot of our volunteers come back.”

Another obstacle presented by the pandemic was the lack of in-person schooling last year, which caused many in the community to think the program wasn’t in operation. That notion, as well as a lack of fundraising opportunities at local events led to a slight dip in donations.

“Getting donations has been a challenge,” Null said. “With the kids being in school or out of school, we weren’t sure how we could get the food to the kids.”

Despite the setbacks, the program is still going strong



Volunteers pack bags of food for the Union County Backpack Program at La Grande Church of Christ on Tuesday, Oct. 5, 2021. The group packs roughly 200 bags every week with the aim of making sure no students go hungry over the weekend.

and carrying on its original mission. The Union County Friday Backpack Program delivers the meals directly to the school and does not see which students receive the meals, but the stories passed back to the organization remind the volunteers why they commit their

time and effort.

“We do hear that it’s making an impact. That’s what keeps us going,” Null said. “Sometimes at events like Celebrate La Grande, people will tell us about a time in their life when this was very helpful.”

Null emphasized that the



Above, a volunteer with the Union County Backpack Program loads bags of food into his car on Tuesday, Oct. 5, 2021. The group has been providing weekend food to students since 2008. Below, volunteers circle a table of donated food to fill the bags.



EOFF

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Q&A last year and I thought it was a remarkable film festival,” he said. “I was delighted that another documentary was invited this year, so that I could come in person and experience the town and the festival.”

Zimmerman is showing his film “Gone in a Flash,” a documentary short about the minds behind flash animation during the early days of the internet. The four-minute film dives into the artists behind the early flash animation and its effect on a generation that was new to the internet at the time. The film centers around Jim Choma, one of the original artists to use flash animation, who became a cult favorite across Canada.

“I love this film,” Zimmerman said. “It’s extraordinary the cross-cultural impact this guy had, but nobody knows about him. So much of that flash work has just disappeared.”

Zimmerman said he created “Gone in a Flash” to mirror early flash anima-



Justin Zimmerman/Contributed Photo
Jim Choma, left, serves as the focal point in Justin Zimmerman’s “Gone in a Flash,” which will be presented at the 2021 Eastern Oregon Film Festival in October. Zimmerman, right, filmed the movie over three major shoots in Florida.

tions in both editing and timing. He is excited to showcase the professional work and major filming shoots that went into creating the film.

In the festival’s 12th rendition, Eastern Oregon Film Festival Director Chris Jennings is looking forward to this year’s group of visiting filmmakers. Jennings was glad to have Zimmerman present his work in person this year.

“His work stands out in that he goes after these really passionate stories,” Jennings said. “The characters’ passions are sometimes their biggest challenge to overcome.”

Jennings said Zimmerman’s eagerness to return to the festival is an example of how the event builds relationships in the film community. He hopes that having filmmakers in this area will showcase La Grande and Eastern Oregon. Zimmerman, who has hosted a film festival and seen his work shown in more than 175 festivals, stressed the importance of bringing communities together through film festivals.

“This is a real passion of mine, being connected to a community and seeing your work screened in public with an audience who does not care about

you, but is interested in your work,” he said. “When an event can bring in creators from across the state and across the country it’s exciting because it not only benefits the people in the community, but you also introduce a new world of outside perspectives to your community.”





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