

Oregon revises hospitalization projections

By REBECCA ELLIS

Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — A new projection from Oregon Health and Science University shows COVID-19 hospitalizations peaking at about 1,250 in mid-February, driven by a surge in the omicron variant. That's a significant drop from earlier forecasts.

OHSU data scientist Peter Graven had sounded alarms in a Dec. 17 press conference that an omicron surge could lead to between two and three times the number of COVID-19 patients hospitalized as there had been during the surge in the delta variant. His original model predicted a peak of between 3,000 to 2,000 hospitalizations linked to

the pandemic, depending on the preventive steps Oregonians take in the coming months

OHSU officials are now revising their estimates. While forecasters say Oregon is poised to "experience an unprecedented wave of infections" from the omicron variant, they say it could lead to fewer hospitalizations than they initially believed.

In a press release, OHSU said it's adjusted its predicted peak hospitalization numbers from as many as 3,000 to about 1,250.

OHSU senior communications specialist Erik Robinson said the forecast "reflects changes in assumptions about omicron," including new data from Europe that indicates a lower hospitalization rate



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting, File An Aug. 19, 2021, file photo shows a patient critically ill with COVID-19 in Portland. New forecasts say a surge in infections linked to the omicron variant may result in fewer new hospitalizations than officials originally feared.

from this variant than from other strains of the virus. Graven's most recent

forecast uses data from Denmark that shows the hospitalization rate appears

to be about 70% lower with omicron than from illness caused by the delta variant.

The Denmark study is part of a growing body of early research that suggests that the omicron coronavirus variant may be less likely to result in severe illness and lead to a hospital visit. Early estimates from researchers in London suggest people infected with omicron are 15% to 20% less likely, on average, to be hospitalized than those with the delta variant, and 40% to 45% less likely to stay in the hospital for one or more nights, as reported by The New York Times.

Graven predicts that if Oregonians take steps to reduce the spread of the virus — such as getting vaccinated and boosted

— the surge in hospitalizations would be around what people saw during the surge in delta cases. Hospitalizations for the delta variant peaked at 1,187 people on Sept. 1.

If people don't take steps to mitigate the spread of the virus, OHSU's model predicts, as many as 1,700 people could be hospitalized by February. That has the potential to overwhelm Oregon's hospitals.

According to the latest figures from the Oregon Health Authority, a total of 398 people are presently hospitalized due to COVID-19 across the state.

The state also reported 1,900 daily COVID-19 diagnoses Tuesday, Dec. 28, the most new cases reported in a single day since September.

Sams takes helm at National Park Service

By ANTONIO SIERRA

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Before he can settle into his job leading one of the largest national park systems in the world, Chuck Sams still needs to pack.

Calling from his Riverside home, Sams said he has to clear out his soon-to-be-former house as he and his family look to complete the move to Alexandria, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., some 2,600 miles away from Pendleton.

"We're going from 3,200 square feet to 1,100 square feet," he said. "It's a challenge, but we'll figure it out."

In his first interview with EO Media Group since he was confirmed and sworn in as the director of the National Park Service, Sams summarized the past four months, from the time President Joe Biden announced his nomination to the day U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland swore in Sams at the base of the Lincoln Memorial.

"It's a front-row seat to the U.S. Constitution," he said.

Sams said he already had built up a rapport with several senators through his previous nonprofit work, making it easier for him to build support for his confirmation. At a time when the U.S. Senate is starkly polarized, the only bump to a confirmation vote by unanimous voice vote was the attempt Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, made to delay the vote. But Sams quickly met with Sullivan and allayed his concerns enough to move forward with the vote.

Throughout the entire process, Sams received vocal support from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Sams, an enrolled member of the CTUIR, worked in tribal government through early March, and the tribes posted a series of congratulatory messages as Sams advanced through his nomination and confirmation. On Friday, Christmas Eve, the tribes hosted Sams once more at its annual celebration at the Mission Longhouse, honoring him with a song.

Sams said he was grateful for the tribes' support and started listing mentors such as Antone Minthorn, Les Minthorn and Frenchy Halfmoon who not only encouraged him to get an education and work his way through tribal government, but to look beyond it.

"I recognize I didn't get to where I am on my own," he said. "I stand on the shoulders of ancestors who came before me."

While Sams' confirmation won many plaudits around the country, expectations also are high.

Many national parks intersect with land where American Indians were removed or excluded to

establish the parks, and tribal leaders told High Country News they hope to work with Sams' administration to secure access to those lands.

Sams said the Biden administration already has put in work in that effort, with the president signing an executive order meant to strengthen nation-to-nation relationships between the federal government and tribal nations. Sams added he and Haaland are open to continuing discussions with tribes on co-management agreements.

"Many of these lands are not just (connected to) one particular tribe: There are a number of tribes who have usual and accustomed rights and privileges to the landscape," he said. "So you have to go into these consultations with that understanding, figuring out how tribes can bring traditional ecological knowledge to the table and be able to implement that. The administration has been very clear that they want to use that."

One of the few areas where Sams faced public scrutiny from senators during his confirmation hearing was the issue of the backlog in deferred maintenance built up at the 423 of national parks, monuments and sites, with senators asking Sams what he would do about the park infrastructure in their home state.

Sams will have an extra \$6.5 billion to use toward park maintenance created through the Great American Outdoors Act passed by Congress in 2020 in addition to additional funds expected through the recently passed infrastructure bill.

"The staff at National Park Service have worked very hard to look at how we even calculate the number of projects we have to do, including the cost," he said. "Therefore we're able to really look at it strategically and (ensure) that money is distributed across the 50 states and U.S. territories so that we can tackle this issue."

Another issue Sams inherits is reports of harassment and discrimination within the service's rank and file. A 2017 survey revealed 40% of park service staff reported experiencing harassment during the past year, according to High Country News. The service commissioned a follow-up report to investigate the issue further, called "NPS Voices Report." But in a November letter to Sams, a group called Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility accused the park service of burying the report and encouraged Sams to take action and remove toxic employees from the service.

Sams said the park service has been doing work in the past three years to address the issues raised in the report, but he promised to do more.

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