

# THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

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## National Guard returns to area hospitals

Following surge in cases, National Guard to deploy across state in support of hospitals

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon will see a return of National Guard members to beleaguered hospitals as yet another wave of the COVID-19 virus sweeps through the nation.

Gov. Kate Brown ordered a second relief mission earlier this month in support of Oregon's hospitals. Nearly 1,200 service members across 40 hospitals were requested by the Oregon Health Authority. The expected deployment date is no later than Tuesday, Jan. 18, and is expected to continue until mid-April.

Hospitals set to receive aid from the National Guard include Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande; Good Shepherd Health Care System, Hermiston; Blue Mountain Hospital District, John Day; and Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Enterprise.

"Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics is extremely grateful for the guard members we will be receiving here to help us with staffing shortages in several of our key support services that have been severely impacted by the current labor market," Mardi Ford, director of communications and marketing, said. "GRH is, and always has been, proud and supportive of our military."

As before, the soldiers will be serving in nonclinical support roles, such as material handlers, equipment runners, COVID-19 testing support, custodial services and other logistical services.

"(Hospitals) were reporting that they were understaffed," said Maj. Chris Clyne with the Oregon National Guard. "The nurses and doctors — you know, the clinical care providers — were having to take out the trash and do these menial tasks, and it was getting in the way of them providing the care to patients. That way they're streamlined and they can just

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## PLOWING AHEAD

ODOT crews work around the clock to keep Interstate 84 open

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

UNION COUNTY — Tesmond Hurd likens the view he sees plowing the roads at night to that of Star Wars.

Hurd is part of the maintenance crew with the Oregon Department of Transportation in La Grande. In summer months, he works on road improvement and repair projects such as chip seals.

In winter, he commands a nearly 30-ton piece of machinery down Interstate 84.

It's not hard to understand the comparisons between spaceships and the industrialized behemoths ODOT uses to clear roads.

At highway speeds, snow resembles trailing stars after the Millennium Falcon engages hyperdrive. The plow even has wings — blades attached to the side of the vehicle that extend just shy of 24 feet for clearing snow. As it's pushed away, the snow forms wakes like those of a naval ship pulling into port. A pair of bright green laser pointers — which keep track of where the wings are — pierce through the blanket of night.

Hurd said his job is to drive in the worst weather conditions every night.

On nights when the snow falls unrelentingly, Hurd spends the entire shift behind the wheel. His only communication once his shift starts might be through the CB radio, which has a local channel for ODOT operators in the field and a channel for relaying information to dispatch about road conditions.

The snow was falling fast — though milder than previous nights — as he worked to clear I-84 on Wednesday, Jan. 5.

"When it's snowing like this, there will be lots of calls for crashes or disabled vehicles," Hurd said.

He passed a semi that appeared to be disabled and alerted dispatch.

Snowplows are sentries for ODOT capable of calling in stuck or stranded vehicles — or unchained semis.

### Unchained

According to Oregon State Police Capt. Stephanie Bigman, troopers issued 32 violations



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group  
Tesmond Hurd with the Oregon Department of Transportation drives a snowplow through a snowstorm Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022, on Interstate 84 in Union County.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group  
An Oregon Department of Transportation message sign on Interstate 84 in Union County notifies drivers that chain laws are in effect on Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022.

and warnings between Jan. 1 and Jan. 6 for commercial vehicles that did not carry or use chains when required. A number of those violations occurred along I-84 in North-eastern Oregon, which had been closed on Jan. 5 at one point due to unchained semis blocking the route at Cabbage Hill near milepost 224.

The fine for unchained commercial vehicles is \$880 per occurrence, up from \$440. The change occurred in September 2021.

"Commercial trucks not chaining up when required is a major contributing factor for freeway closure that occur in

the mountain passes of Eastern Oregon," Tom Strandberg, public information officer for ODOT, said. "Once a truck starts sliding or jackknifes it can quickly block lanes and close down the freeway. It can then take several hours to get the proper tow service providers to respond to the scene and move the disabled vehicle. Depending on the location and duration of the closure, it can impact hundreds or thousands of motorists."

According to an ODOT press release, the estimated cost of delays caused by trucks failing to follow Oregon chain laws is more than \$8 million

a year — to the motor carrier industry and other highway users.

"When it comes to chaining, I don't chain — I don't want to hurt anybody — I park it," Samuri Schaffer, a truck driver of more than 15 years, said on Jan. 5 at the Flying J Travel Center outside La Grande when he was waiting out the snowstorm that had closed Interstate 84. "I don't deal with it until they take off the chain laws. There's so much liability on us."

Schaffer stated the liabilities for truck drivers can be severe if they are involved in any accident, so he avoids the issue entirely by keeping off the road.

If a truck is involved in a crash where failure to use chains is a factor, there could be additional costs for the motor carrier, according to a press release from ODOT.

### A Sisyphean task

Inside, the cockpit of the snowplow is kept blisteringly warm. It isn't for comfort — Hurd said he sheds jackets and layers and opens the windows even when it is below freezing outside, and getting colder. If it weren't for the heat, he wouldn't be able to see out of the windshield.

"You can see the snow on the windshield," he said. "It will just freeze there, and it will keep building and building until you have to get out and clear the windshield every few miles."

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## Pediatric COVID-19 cases rise amid spread of omicron variant

OHA reports nearly 9,000 cases in the first week of 2022

By DAVIS CARBAUGH  
The Observer

SALEM — The omicron variant is creating a sharp rise in pediatric COVID-19 cases.

The Oregon Health Authority's daily COVID-19 report on Friday, Jan. 14, indicated that the

agency is concerned over the recent rapid increase of COVID-19 cases among children ages 0 to 17.

Pediatric COVID-19 cases saw a sustained increase in August and September of 2021, as about 20% of the state's total COVID-19 cases were reported among individuals younger than 18. In the late fall and early winter there was a significant decrease in juvenile cases, and the percentage dipped to roughly 12% in

mid-December. However, since then, there has been an increase from 12.7% on Dec. 19 to 20.6% in early January.

Since the start of the pandemic, OHA has reported 72,180 confirmed cases and 5,896 presumptive cases among people younger than 18.

Throughout all of 2020 the highest weekly total for pediatric cases was 1,100, while at the peak in 2021

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Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File  
Giavonna LaMiller, under the direction of volunteer Catherine Parks, self-administers a COVID-19 test in the Bi-Mart parking lot, the site of a mass testing event in La Grande on Friday, Aug. 27, 2021.

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### WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

	<b>Tonight</b> 32 LOW Rain and drizzle		<b>Wednesday</b> 39/34 Mostly cloudy
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