

# CHILDREN

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in the fall the state was averaging roughly 2,500 pediatric cases per week. At the end of the week of Dec. 26, the case count skyrocketed to 4,851. That record-high number nearly doubled in the following week, reaching 8,885 cases in the first week of January. Throughout the recent increase, OHA reported that the positivity rate was highest among children ages 12 to 17.

Since the COVID-19 vaccine became available to ages 12 to 15 in May 2021 and to ages 5 to 11 the following October, Oregon has seen a steady increase in juvenile vaccinations. As of Jan. 13, 67% of children ages 12 to 17 had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and 33.4% of Oregon's children from age 5 to 11 had been vaccinated with at least one dose. That total comes out to 312,323 individuals ages 5 to 17 who have received at least one dose.

Union County's total pediatric case rate is currently ranked in the middle of all counties in Oregon. Union County's rate of 10,321 cases per

100,000 is the 16th highest out of the 36 counties in the state, while Wallowa County's rate of 9,657 is the 21st highest.

Union and Wallowa counties have not been immune from the recent surge in pediatric cases. Union County's case total for children increased from single digits in late November and early December to 15 per week on Dec. 26 and 296 after Jan. 2. In Wallowa County, five pediatric cases were reported on Dec. 26 and seven on Jan. 2.

Union County schools have felt the steady impact of absences among students and staff, with most schools seeing about five students out at a time in the latest update from Jan. 14. The Elgin School District recently experienced a surge, with 30 students absent at both Elgin High School and Stella Mayfield Elementary School. Students are encouraged to stay home if they are experiencing common COVID-19 symptoms.

In addition to pediatric cases, the absence of teachers due to COVID-19 can become a major obstacle due to a lack of substitute teachers across the county.

# PLOW

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Already an hour into his shift, ice had begun to amass on the corners of the windshield. The windshield wipers squeaked incessantly as they battled the accumulating snow. If not addressed, the windshield would freeze over until just a small circle of visibility remained. At least one secondary headlight was completely encased in ice; the other was encased in snow.

Hurd resigned to leaving the wipers on despite the noise — a chirping metronome for a long night.

It's a Sisyphean task to keep the roads clear during heavy snowfall.

ODOT plow operators are assigned sections of the interstate and state roads to keep clear. Mostly, they handle I-84, but they also are responsible for plowing La Grande's Island Avenue. Sometimes, they pair up when conditions are poor, running tandem down the freeway and clearing it all in one fell swoop.

"You can only plow so fast, so you just keep making laps and keep plowing and plowing," Hurd said of plowing during heavy snowfall. "Hopefully you don't have to close the



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Tesmond Hurd's snowplow is filled with sand — an additive and dispersing agent to help increase traction on the freeways — before beginning his plowing route along Interstate 84 in Union County on Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022.

freeway down."

If the road maintenance department was short-staffed, the drivers might not be able to keep up with the snow.

The Observer recently reported on a possible shortage of ODOT snowplow operators. Craig Slipp, the manager for ODOT Region 5 — the area encompassing most of Eastern Oregon — told The Observer there were 12 open road maintenance positions. Hurd said his department in La Grande

was fully staffed, however.

When it's snowing, the plow operators lay down sand for traction; they use salt in drier conditions. Hurd said he had seen firsthand the immediate impact sand can have when freeing stuck motorists.

ODOT keeps barns full of both materials for plows to refill. The sand and salt also fulfill a secondary purpose of increasing the weight of the snowplow, increasing its individual traction capabilities. It is difficult to extricate a snow-

plow that has been disabled by the snow.

Hurd said there were a number of reasons why ODOT makes the decision to close the interstate. Recently, unchained semis had closed down the freeway, as did snowdrifts formed by heavy winds and fresh snow, creating whiteout conditions on the interstate — for motorists and snowplow operators.

"If we can't see and we're running off the road," Hurd said, "we'll make the call to close it."

# GUARD

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focus 100% on caring for the patients."

According to Clyne, each hospital in Eastern Oregon would receive an average of five citizen-soldiers.

"We have been told that Blue Mountain Hospital District is set to receive five members of the Oregon National Guard next week," Derek Daly, chief executive officer of Blue Mountain Hospital District, said. "We are thankful for these staffing resources and the support from the National Guard. We plan to utilize these team members to help in non-clinical positions, such as environmental services, across our campuses." Caitlin Cozad, marketing and communications director with Good Shepherd in Hermiston, said the hospital is expecting six guard member to support the hospital.

Wallowa Memorial Hospital welcomed five soldiers on Jan. 17.

"Wallowa Memorial Hospital was grateful to wel-



Maj. W. Chris Clyne/Oregon National Guard Public Affairs

Staff Sgt. David Seymour, from C Company 3rd Battalion, 116 Cavalry Brigade, Oregon Army National Guard, informs soldiers of mission requirements at the Anderson Readiness Center in Salem on Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. The deployment is the second iteration of nonclinical support for Oregon hospitals by the National Guard, which will grow to more 1,200 guard members by the end of January, filling critical hospital staffing shortages.

come five National Guard members," said Brooke Pace, director of communications and public relations at Wallowa Memorial Hospital. "We plan to utilize this additional personnel in various departments, from Environmental Services to hospital and clinic screening. The presence of five additional staff members helps ensure that we will continue to provide premier care to the people of Wallowa County in the face

of yet another COVID-19 surge."

### Close to home

But as to why the Oregon National Guard deploys soldiers to support and logistical assignments at the hospitals instead of ones with medical training has a surprising reason behind it, according to guard officials. Medical staff in the Oregon National Guard often hold positions at local hospitals for their non-military job,

Clyne said.

Many citizen-soldiers will be deployed to the communities in which they live, according to Clyne.

"One of the efforts that we've been making is to try to get (soldiers) in the location where they live," Clyne said. "One of the things that we pride ourselves in is that we serve in the communities where we live. That's one of the efforts and priorities that leadership has made, (to give guard members) that chance to serve as close to home as possible."

The omicron variant has been rapidly spreading across Oregon and the nation, driving record-breaking infection rates and leading to shortages of testing kits and long lines at drive-thru testing clinics. According to OHA data, it is the prevailing variant in Oregon as of Jan. 2, accounting for nearly all new infections. At least one sequenced infection has been traced to Eastern Oregon, according to the OHA.

Data shows hospitalizations from the new circulating variant are lower, but

the higher number of people infected has led to hospitalization levels similar to the previous delta variant.

The number of hospitalized patients at Oregon hospitals due to COVID-19 is 811 and climbing, as of Jan. 14, according to OHA data. The previous peak in hospi-

talization was Sept. 1, 2021, with 1,178 patients hospitalized due to the delta variant.

The Oregon National Guard was called in last August to help understaffed hospitals during the delta variant surge. Those soldiers remained at the hospitals until mid-December.

### Robert "Bob" Ray Miller

August 29, 1945 – January 3, 2022

Robert "Bob" Ray Miller, 76, of Cove, passed away on Monday, Jan. 3, 2022, at Grande Ronde Hospital. At his request, there will not be a service.

Bob was born on Aug. 29, 1945, in Kansas to Lloyd and Donna Miller. He resided in Idaho's Treasure Valley until 1977 and then moved to the Grande Ronde Valley. He married Vera Rudolph on July 13, 1974.

Bob worked as a Partsman for car dealerships in La Grande and Baker City. He enjoyed building rock walls. Later in life, he loved walking and spoiling his dog. His proudest moments were spent with his family.

Bob is survived by his daughters, Kathy Kirby (Bert) of Union, Oregon, and Susan Drinnon (Scott) of Bremerton, Washington; daughter-in-law, Margie Prickett of Nampa, Idaho; nine grandchildren; 20 great-grandchildren; two great-great grandchildren; and many nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his wife, Vera Miller; son, Doug Prickett; and parents, Lloyd and Donna Miller.

Online condolences may be made to the family at [www.lovelandfuneralchapel.com](http://www.lovelandfuneralchapel.com).



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