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Indoor mandate to end in March

State officials say Oregon is 'past its peak' for COVID-19 cases due to the omicron variant

By ELIZABETH MILLER
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Citing a projected drop in hospitalizations next month, Oregon health officials have announced an end to indoor mask requirements in public places “no later than March 31.”

That end of March timeline also includes mask requirements inside schools, Oregon Health Authority officials said on Monday, Feb. 7.

With the state’s temporary indoor mask mandate rule set to expire on Feb. 8, OHA officials needed to file a new permanent rule with the Oregon Secretary of State, if they wanted to maintain the requirement. But, in response to vocal criticism of “permanent rules” at hearings last month, state health officials said the mandates wouldn’t last forever.

Now, citing health scientists’ projections that “400 or fewer Oregonians would be hospitalized with COVID-19” by late March, officials have given a sunset for the rule extension.

“The evidence from Oregon and around the country is clear: masks save lives by slowing the spread of COVID-19,” said state health officer Dr. Dean Sidelinger in a release on Feb. 7 announcing the news.

Mounting evidence that omicron cases are declining has led Oregon to join a growing number of states that are relaxing indoor mask rules.

“We should see COVID-19 hospitalizations drop by the end of March because so many Oregonians are wearing masks and taking other steps to protect themselves and each other, such as getting a booster shot or vaccinating their children,” Sidelinger said. “At that point, it will be safer to lift mask rules.”

Currently, hospitalizations remain above 1,000

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Weathering the virus

Eastern Oregon University relies on campus-wide effort to endure COVID-19 pandemic

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon University’s all-hands-on-deck approach is getting the school through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The La Grande university has upped its testing and vaccine availability in the midst of another COVID-19 spike early in 2022. While cases at the school have seen an uptick, mirroring the effects of the omicron variant across the state, university officials have been prudent in sustaining an in-person learning experience for students.

“We feel like through all of the methods we’re using, we’ve been able to keep ourselves open,” said Lacy Karpilo, vice president for student affairs. “I think we’ve demonstrated that we can create an environment where we’re limiting the spread, but still able to engage with each other.”

Karpilo noted that the university has been working closely with the Center for Human Development and collaborating and sharing results with the Oregon Health Authority throughout the pandemic. The two health organizations have played a significant role in the university’s decision-making as it has sought to create the safest learning environment. The goal since the start of the pandemic has been to sustain in-person learning at the university — efforts among students and staff have been made across campus to achieve this goal and limit the spread.

“They recommended that we not go remote. They recommended us to continue doing what we’re doing, as well as up our masks,” Karpilo said. “They really felt that the safest place for people to be is a classroom with masks and distancing, as well as what we’re doing on our campus to stay safe.”

A nationwide trend among university students was an uptick in COVID-19 following winter break — students and staff typically travel to visit family and friends for the holidays. Eastern saw a significant increase in cases after



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Eastern Oregon University, pictured here in the fall of 2021, has one the highest rate of COVID-19 vaccine exemption statuses among its students and faculty, according to Oregon Public Broadcasting. Approximately 24% of students and 18% of employees have vaccination exemptions, as compared to the average of 10% at other public universities in Oregon.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Hanna Saunders, a freshman accounting student at Eastern Oregon University, studies in EOU’s library on Thursday, Oct. 28, 2021. The university upped its testing and vaccine availability in response to another COVID-19 spike early in 2022.

the break, reporting 110 cases from off-campus students and 25 among on-campus students during January. Throughout the same time frame, 19 employees recorded positive test results.

The uptick reflected county and state numbers in early January, when Union County recorded just under 37 cases per day. In the two-week period from Jan. 17 through Jan. 30, the county averaged roughly 52 cases per day.

Tim Seydel, EOU’s vice president for university advancement, and Karpilo stated the university upped testing following winter break, to be extra cautious in identi-

fying any cases and ensuring the campus was still a safe place. While numerous schools nationwide transitioned into post-holiday classes with several weeks of online learning, Seydel noted that Eastern continued its focus on providing safe in-person education.

“Statewide, schools saw a significant uptick in numbers when they started testing at the beginning of term. There was this immediate statewide trend,” he said. “That is why we want to test these students so that we can get them the help they need or get them into isolation and quarantine so we can help reduce it.”

Emphasizing vaccinations

The university staff is noticing that the omicron variant is having a much different effect on COVID-19 trends on campus compared to previous strands. In the fall, many students who got tested when they were sick ended up not having COVID-19, whereas now most students reporting common symptoms to the university’s student health center are testing positive.

Karpilo noted that while omicron symptoms may be more mild, cutting the spread is still of the utmost importance in avoiding hospital overload. Due to this trend in hospitals nationwide, Eastern continues to emphasize the vaccine and booster shots to faculty and students.

“That’s the way for us to really get to the other side of this pandemic, having as many people as possible vaccinated and boosted,” Karpilo said. “But we are also taking it from a perspective of education and care. We are treating all of our students respectfully regardless of vaccination status.”

Prior to the vaccines, all students and staff were tested upon returning to campus, and the university continues to test unvaccinated individuals at the beginning of each term.

The university also hosted

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Nobody hurt in Elgin house fire Friday

The home’s four residents all escaped unharmed after blaze started

By DICK MASON
The Observer

ELGIN — Nobody was injured in a house fire in Elgin late in the morning

of Friday, Feb. 4. The home’s four residents, two adults and two children, were in the house when the fire started and all quickly escaped.

“We are very fortunate that our family got out,” said Melody Payne, whose son and his family were the residents of the one-story home at 25 N. Fifth St.

One of the initial first

responders at the scene was Union County Sheriff’s Office Deputy Brad Bell, who arrived at an unnerving situation.

“Flames were coming from the garage that were 20- to 25-foot high,” he said.

Bell said he was concerned to see that some of the occupants who had

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Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Firefighters respond to a house fire at 25 N. Fifth St., Elgin, on Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Only a handful of personal belongings were recovered, but nobody was injured in the blaze.

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