

Oregon health officials urge boosters, say Omicron surge will see thousands hospitalized by February

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State health officials warned Friday, Dec. 17 that the Omicron variant of the coronavirus is expected to put thousands of Oregonians in the hospital by February - more than double the peak during previous surges.

They urged Oregonians to get booster COVID shots and outlined an ambitious plan to deliver 1 million booster doses across the state by the end of January.

Dr. Peter Graven, lead data scientist at OHSU's Business Intelligence Unit, said the Omicron variant is more contagious and resistant to vaccines and is putting more people in the hospital. Cases across the state will begin to increase significantly by mid-January, he said.

"By the time we reach a peak, we do unfortunately expect the number of hospitalized Oregonians could eclipse the number from the Delta surge in September," he said during a press conference Friday.

According to Graven's modeling, more than 3,000 people could end up hospitalized statewide by early February, compared with 1,200 at the peak of the late summer Delta surge.

That scenario would place significant strains on Salem Hospital, the flagship hospital for the six-county Willamette Valley region.

At the peak of the Delta surge, Salem Hospital recorded one in four beds occupied by a COVID patient, peaking with 112

patients with COVID on Sept. 6. Twenty-two of them were in the hospital's 30-bed ICU.

Since the Delta surge has waned, the hospital has remained far busier than was typical before the pandemic, at times going over its licensed bed capacity. Hospital leaders say that's due to a mix of factors including chronic illnesses worsening for people who have delayed care during Covid peaks, and delay in discharging patients to short-staffed long-term care facilities.

On Dec. 9, Salem Hospital had 504 inpatients, despite being licensed for just 494 beds.

Federal pandemic waivers allow the hospital to care for more patients than its licensed capacity.

Hospital spokeswoman Lisa Wood said Friday that Salem Health is continuing to evaluate its surge plans and was "confident that the scalable plans we've developed will enable us to expand care to meet the anticipated surge."

"We are encouraged by the early modeling that omicron variant COVID inpatients are less likely to require ICU-level care; however, this variant will impact hospital capacity. Through Salem Health's surge planning and execution, we have become adept at the flexibility and rapid response required to accommodate the daily patient census and care for the needs of the community," Wood wrote in an email.

The hospital for three months relied on help from the Oregon National Guard to

care for a record number of patients. Guard members ended that work Dec. 10.

Pat Allen, Oregon Health Authority director, said the agency is extending its staffing contract to bring more nurses and health care workers from out of state into hospitals and vaccination clinics to help handle the surge.

He said an emergency management command center will coordinate the use of available beds and ventilators.

Graven said even if 14,000 people a day get their booster shot, the peak could still be higher than in September.

He said Omicron has a dramatically lower death rate than previous variants, but if people contract the virus and get ill they're still going to fill hospital beds past capacity.

Gov. Kate Brown didn't announce any new restrictions during the press conference Friday, instead saying her focus was on vaccinating vulnerable Oregonians.

"I am absolutely committed to keeping our schools open to the extent that we can do that safely," Brown said.

Allen said people may hear Omicron is more resistant to vaccines and say there's no point in getting vaccinated.

But he said people who are vaccinated are less likely to become severely ill.

"Preliminary research tells us that a booster dose further builds antibodies to fight against the virus," he said.

Allen said Oregonians have had issues accessing booster doses because of staffing shortages, not dose shortages.

He said OHA will add three new high-capacity vaccine sites and resume mobile vaccine clinics with support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

As of Dec. 16, more than half of Oregonians 65 and older have gotten a third vaccine dose, Allen said.

In Marion County, 74.9% of people 18 and older are vaccinated with at least one dose and 24% have gotten a third dose. In Polk County it's 77.9% vaccinated and 28% have gotten a third dose.

Jacqui Umstead, Polk County's public health administrator, said her department has already been planning for additional Covid vaccination and testing events. Those include a weekly walk-in vaccination clinic at Mi Casita 'Los Primos' market in Independence which has operated on Saturdays since the beginning of November. The clinic will run from 12-5 p.m. Saturday and then reopen after the holidays on Jan. 8.

Marion County spokesman Jon Heynen did not immediately respond to questions from Salem Reporter about how the health department plans to prepare for the surge.

Allen said the state's priority will be getting older adults in nursing homes and long-term care facilities, as well as communities of color vaccinated.

He said OHA will send mobile vaccination teams to skilled nursing facilities. There are 35 vaccination events for communities of color and an additional 93 scheduled in the coming weeks, Allen said.

Gubser Miracle of Lights wraps up this weekend

The route is approximately 3.5 miles and runs through the Gubser neighborhood beginning at 14th Avenue NE and Lockhaven Drive.

