

Vaccine: ‘We expect that cases will ramp up quickly’

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example, the vaccination rate was 54%. By late September, it was 63%.

The county initially set the goal in the hopes of reaching herd immunity against COVID-19. But public health leaders have cautioned for the past several months that it is unclear whether the 70% target will be effective as variants such as delta and omicron emerge.

In a weekly vaccine task force update, the county also reported Friday that 80% of residents 18 and older are at least partially vaccinated.

“We would just urge other folks who are, maybe have been, on the sidelines thinking it over to ask more questions and, hopefully, get vaccinated themselves,” Tom Bennett, a county spokesman, said.

The vaccine task force is planning more booster clinics that offer the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines. So far, more than 9,000 residents have received booster doses, the county reported.

While the county marked the vaccination milestone, state leaders warned of a new wave of virus cases driven by the omicron variant.

“We’re in a race against the clock,” Gov. Kate Brown said during a Friday afternoon press call.

The new infections come



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Clatsop County has among the highest vaccination rates in the state.

ONLY 4.4% OF ALL VACCINE BREAKTHROUGH CASES HAVE REQUIRED HOSPITALIZATION, AND 1.3% HAVE DIED. THE AVERAGE AGE OF VACCINATED PEOPLE WHO DIED WAS 81.

as Oregon is slowly recovering from the delta surge that began last July and peaked in early September.

A forecast released by Oregon Health & Science

University said the new variant will push out the dominant delta variant by the last week of December.

Peter Graven, the lead author of the OHSU fore-

cast, said omicron doubles at twice the rate of the delta variant, doubling the number of infections every two days.

“We have about two to

three weeks before we’ll see omicron accelerate and become the dominant strain,” Graven said. “We expect that cases will ramp up quickly.”

The OHSU report said early studies in Europe show vaccines and earlier exposure to the virus are not as effective against omicron as earlier variations of COVID-19.

The Pfizer and Moderna two-shot vaccination loses about 50% of its protective power with omicron. The third booster shot of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, now authorized for anyone over age 16, offers significant additional protection.

The booster is especially needed for those most vulnerable to severe illness, including immunocompromised residents or older adults living in congregant settings.

“I’m calling on 1 million Oregonians to step up and get a booster shot,” Brown said.

The Oregon Health Authority’s weekly report on virus cases found that unvaccinated people accounted for just under 70% of new infections. Vaccinated people accounted for just over 30%.

The biggest difference is in severity of illness. Only 4.4% of all vaccine breakthrough cases have required hospitalization, and 1.3% have died. The average age of vaccinated people who died was 81.

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Merila: Wants to help change ‘bootstrap ideology’

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The field of social work tends to have a high burn-out rate. Behavioral health care can involve listening to people’s pain in back-to-back sessions, sometimes eight in a day.

It is also a profession where it is possible to see how the “isms” — racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ablism and so on — shape the individual.

“It’s really important that, while we are doing therapeutic work with folks and helping them to process through whatever it is they need to process through, that we’re also simultaneously looking at the ways that our society has created these problems,” Merila said.

Even well-intentioned health care providers, she said, can pressure their clients to over-own their traumatic experiences and position in the world, to make them feel there’s something basically wrong with them. Through her work at Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county’s mental health and substance abuse treatment contractor, Merila said she wants to help change this “bootstrap ideology.”

Merila loves her job. But when she was younger, social work wasn’t the profession she imagined herself going into.

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Shyra Merila | clinical operations officer at Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare

In the early 2000s, Merila was all over The Astorian’s sports coverage as a track and volleyball star at Astoria High School.

After she did her undergraduate work — initially at Eastern Oregon University, where she played volleyball, before finishing at Humboldt State University in Northern California — she returned to Astoria and coached track, volleyball and seventh-grade girls basketball.

“I really didn’t know anything about basketball. I just got thrown into coaching. But it’s not hard when (the students) don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing, either,” she said with a laugh.

To this day, Merila holds the high school squat

record — 225 pounds — for her body weight class (below 130 pounds), according to principal Lynn Jackson.

Asked what a profile about her would be incomplete without, Merila remembered a time in high school when she ran the 4x100-meter relay. She had reached the second leg and realized that she’d left the baton at the starting line.

“That was probably one of the most embarrassing moments of my life,” she said.

She wondered if Jackson tells that story to athletes when they’re having a bad day.

No, Jackson said in an email, “but it does provide me with a very fond memory.”

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