

State funding to go to personnel

Eastern Oregon health departments plan to use initial state funding to help cover personnel costs

By ALEX CASTLE
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — The Oregon Health Authority recently dished out \$4 million in funding to support local COVID-19 responses across the state, and most health departments in Eastern Oregon are using that to keep paying their personnel during the pandemic.

“The fact is, it’s going to personnel,” said Joe Fiumara, director of Umatilla County Public Health. “Our personnel expenses dwarf our material expenses.”

The money can be used to cover the labor costs of reporting and monitoring the spread, identifying and screening individuals for the virus and for education, prevention and other communication efforts for the public.

For Umatilla County, which received \$113,923, it will help cover the nearly \$160,000 in payroll Fiumara said his 25 employees racked up last month. While many employees have had to devote all their time and efforts to coronavirus response in the past month, other public health programs need to be maintained during the crisis too.

Union County received \$58,006 and handed that to La Grande’s Center for Human Development, which serves as the county’s public health agency. Carrie Brogoitti, the center’s public health administrator, said the funding will also help them retain their staff and maintain focus



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Umatilla County Public Health plans to use the \$113,923 they received from the Oregon Health Authority to help cover personnel costs. The money is a part of \$4 million in funding recently distributed by OHA to help support local COVID-19 responses throughout the state.

on COVID-19.

“For smaller health departments in Eastern Oregon, any funding we receive to support communicable disease response makes a big difference,” Brogoitti said. “Most of the health departments in our region have a small number of employees that normally work in a variety of different programs.”

In Morrow County, public health director Sheree Smith unexpectedly had to take a leave from the county’s offices last week and Diane Kilkenny was named interim director in her place. Kilkenny confirmed Smith will be returning and said the county’s OHA allocation may be used in both preparedness and response to the pandemic, which includes staffing and equipment.

Jiselle Halfmoon, a spokeswoman for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation’s COVID-19 Incident Command, confirmed the tribes received its money from OHA, but was still in the process of deciding how to spend it. She said staff from Yellowhawk will meet Monday to discuss their options

with the goal of maximizing the money’s impact.

Baker County also received \$33,071, and Walla Walla County received \$32,461.

Generally, funding for local health departments is splintered between different sources, Fiumara said, but primarily comes from the state and federal government. More than this initial \$4 million will eventually make its way to the local level, which each department will undoubtedly need.

“It’s not going to go nearly as far as it needs to,” said Fiumara of the first funding allocation.

However, he added that OHA has been providing guidance to local departments on what adjustments they can make to other services and programs to make best use of the funding they have.

Some funding, such as modernization funding Umatilla County already received, can be used to supplement the costs of the COVID-19 response. Other funding, such as dollars for the county’s tobacco program, can’t.

“As frustrating as it is, some of that money will end

up getting sent back to the state,” Fiumara said.

The state has also helped mitigate the challenges of staff not having time to work on their usual programs.

Goals and deadlines for some such programs have been modified and extended. And for Umatilla County’s tobacco program, for example, Fiumara said the state is handling any indoor smoking complaints that may be received so local staff can remain focused on the outbreak.

While much of the focus is on the staffing, Umatilla County isn’t ignoring its stock of equipment. Fiumara said the department recently placed a \$5,000 order for surgical masks that he hopes will arrive soon.

As for the stories surfacing that the Trump administration is moving toward recommending people wear masks and cover their face whenever leaving their home, Fiumara said he doesn’t think it’s so straightforward.

“Wearing a mask is probably more likely to protect other people from you than it is to protect you from other people,” he said.

With many masks being homemade as well, Fiumara said it’s difficult to assess how effective they could be and acknowledged that it may be more helpful to people mentally to wear a mask than it actually is physically protecting them.

“We just don’t and can’t know that much about them,” he said.

For now, Umatilla County plans to continue its same messaging to emphasize people stay home as much as possible and follow social distancing guidelines.

East Oregonian reporter Antonio Sierra and the La Grande Observer contributed to this report.

BRIEFLY

Umatilla County has three new coronavirus cases

UMATILLACOUNTY — Umatilla County Public Health announced Monday that three new cases of COVID-19 were identified, bringing Umatilla County’s total since the beginning of the outbreak to eight.

According to a press release, one of people diagnosed with the coronavirus was in close contact with one of the two cases in Morrow County while the other two Umatilla County patients have no connection to each other or any of the other previous cases. All three of the new COVID-19 cases are self-isolating and recovering from home.

On Sunday, Hermiston Family Medicine and Urgent Care announced it was closing for two weeks “due to a recent exposure.” In a reply to a concerned patient, the account wrote that no patients were in the clinic at the time of the exposure and staff were the only ones at risk of exposure.

Joe Fiumara, the director of Umatilla County Public Health, declined to say whether any of the new spate of COVID-19 cases were connected to Hermiston Family Medicine.

As with previous cases, Umatilla County is declining to release the patient’s city of residence, age ranges or any other demographic information.

Fiumara said the county intends to release more information on the positive cases in the future,

but he wasn’t ready to disclose when that would be and what new information would be made public.

He added that he knew residents were interested in more information on the cases, but the health department still needed to protect patient confidentiality.

The public health department did update its testing numbers: out of 256 tests in Umatilla County, eight have come back positive.

Kayak Public Transit closure extended

MISSION — The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation are extending the closure of Kayak Public Transit due to COVID-19 until April 11, a press release said.

The tribes will continue to monitor the situation and will make a determination about the following week on or before April 10, the release said.

The closure — in response to COVID-19 — started on Monday, March 23.

“Kayak recognizes its role as a lifeline for access to employment, medical and shopping needs throughout the region and we do not take this action lightly,” the release said.

Kayak Public Transit operates three fixed routes and four commuter bus services in Southeastern Washington and Northeastern Oregon, including La Grande, Hermiston and Walla Walla, Washington.

— EO Media Group

Field learning



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Seely Hemphill, 10, enters a makeshift schoolhouse that her parents made near Schoolhouse Road south of Pendleton on Monday morning. The schoolhouse was put together so that Hemphill and her brother, Callen, 8, could work on schoolwork while their mother was at work as a nurse and their father tended to the surrounding fields.

Crossing the finish line

Hermiston runner gets creative after canceled marathon

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — When the thing you were looking forward to gets canceled, sometimes you have to just make do with what you’ve got.

For Liz Sharon, that meant a “mini marathon” in Hermiston on Friday after her real marathon, the Revel Mt. Charleston Marathon in Las Vegas, was called off because of COVID-19.

Sharon had been in training since December and planned to run the full marathon on Saturday with her younger sister, followed by some vacation time together. Instead, on Fri-



Contributed photo by Kim Puzey
Liz Sharon runs a half marathon along Highland Avenue in Hermiston on Friday.

day she ran a half marathon (13.1 miles) up and down the bicycle lane on Highland Avenue in Hermiston, being careful not to touch things along the route or get too close to any passerby.

“When the race got canceled I was so sad, but I felt so silly being sad when so

many more serious things are going on in the world, with people losing their jobs and all the deaths,” she said. “But it’s hard when you work so hard for something, and have a goal.”

Trying to make lemonade out of lemons, her husband Joseph Sharon and their children did what they could to help create a race atmosphere. They took turns running segments with her, handed out water along the way and were there to cheer for her at the “finish line.” Her sister called her to cheer her on.

After her husband posted about the family activity on Facebook, several family friends also took the time to drive by and honk or cheer from a safe distance away.

“That meant so much to me,” Sharon said. “I wanted to give them a hug, but of course you can’t.”



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During this challenging time, know that the caregivers of Morrow County Health District continue to be here for you.

All our clinic locations throughout Morrow

County remain open by appointment. Please call your clinic location to schedule an appointment with your care provider.

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Irrigon Medical Clinic
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Ione Community Clinic
(541) 422-7128

Morrow County Health District Supports the State-Wide Order
“Stay Home, Save Lives.”