

Shaky ground: Thanksgiving spike expected

Continued from Page A1

Health Director Joe Fiumara said hospitals are utilizing more beds than previously, but they still have room to take on more patients.

But the surge of new COVID-19 cases statewide and in the Portland metro area could still be felt locally, Fiumara said.

Portland hospitals have access to specialists and equipment that local hospitals don't, which could affect how local patients are treated for the virus. Dr. James Heilman, an associate professor of emergency medicine at the OHSU School of Medicine, said the hospital will often help COVID-19 patients from rural counties who are pregnant or suffering from a stroke.

Heilman added that several backup mechanisms — like transferring a patient to another hospital or facility — would have to fail before they would stop accepting rural transfer patients.

His biggest concerns, however, is that patients with other ailments unrelated to COVID-19 will not be transferred because the ward will be filled with COVID-19 patients. This is especially problematic as flu season begins, which will typically fill up hospitals and force them to refer patients elsewhere in non-pandemic years.

Data provided by Oregon Health & Science University shows the hospital has accepted 69 total transfer



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Some seriously ill COVID-19 patients will enter St. Anthony Hospital through this door leading to the emergency department.

patients from Good Shepherd, St. Anthony, Grande Ronde and Saint Alphonsus hospitals since May.

Fiumara said the increase in hospitalized patients could also be due to the type of people who have been contracting it lately.

"We had cases jump in July, but we really didn't fill the hospitals," he said. "I think the main reason for that is that a lot of cases were in the 20s and 30s. And we do know with the virus that the older you are the more at-risk you are. Those in the 20s and 30s are at a low risk of complications and have a low risk of needing to be hospitalized."

Umatilla County saw a rise in cases following Halloween, and in a Nov. 24 newsletter, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock worried that a Thanksgiving day spike could affect older residents.

"(Our) numbers are too

high and two days from now we are going to experience Thanksgiving and despite the warnings, we will likely see yet another spike coming down the road," he wrote. "Our concern here is that the Halloween parties largely included a younger crowd although they shared the virus with their families. Thanksgiving is likely to include a much older population as active participants and therefore would include many more people with preexisting conditions and age working against them."

At a press conference convened by Gov. Kate Brown on Nov. 25, Dr. David Zonies, the medical director for the intensive care units at OHSU, compared working with COVID-19 patients in the intensive care unit at OHSU to working on the front lines of a war in Afghanistan, where he served years ago.

Zonies pleaded with Ore-

gonians to take the virus seriously, adding that he still encountered critically ill patients who believed the virus was made-up or overblown.

He said Portland hospitals weren't turning away rural patients, but it was a concern.

"At this point we have the ability to care for everyone who needs our help, and as Gov. Brown previously mentioned, the staffing issue is a very real one," he said, referring to the toll the virus has taken on frontline health care workers, some of whom are leaving due to the stress and anxiety brought on by the pandemic. "So we are currently not in a position where we would be turning away care for patients who need higher levels of care specifically in hospitals in the metropolitan area that have more specialty services (and) more ICUs that can be staffed. But it is a concern that we're all working through right now."

Patrick Allen, the director of the Oregon Health Authority, said everyone in the state needed to work together to ensure there is enough hospital capacity to go around.

"The fact that your local hospital may not seem to be full doesn't necessarily mean that there isn't somebody in your hospital that might need to be transferred to Portland or Boise or Tri-Cities for a more advanced level of care," he said. "What needs to be is all Oregonians need to do their part to keep people out of the hospital."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Morgan Guenther busses tables on the final day of dine-in eating at The Prodigal Son in Pendleton on Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020. The restaurant has laid off all of its employees, a few of whom will work limited-hour shifts selling growler refills, and will be closed until dine-in eating resumes, according to owners Tim and Jennifer Guenther.

Restrictions:

Continued from Page A1

Indoor recreation, fitness, and entertainment establishments, including gyms, will remain closed.

Outdoor recreation, fitness, and entertainment activities, including outdoor gym activities, will be allowed, with a maximum limit of 50 people.

Retail stores, grocery stores, pharmacies, and indoor and outdoor shopping centers and malls will be limited to a maximum of 50% of capacity, with curbside pickup encouraged.

Faith institutions, funeral homes, mortuaries, and cemeteries will be limited to a maximum of 25% of capacity or 100 people indoors (whichever is smaller), or 150 people outdoors.

Office workplaces will be required to utilize remote work to the maximum extent possible, with offices closed to the general public.

Personal services businesses will be allowed to continue to operate with health and safety measures currently in place.

Long-term care facilities can allow limited outdoor visitation, following current rules.

Holiday concerns

The Transportation Security Administration reported over 3 million people passing through airport security all over the country over the past weekend, the most since March. Canada celebrates Thanksgiving in mid-October and, despite similar warnings about traveling, saw a doubling of daily cases by the first week of November.

The number of travelers during the upcoming holidays is expected to be much smaller than last year, before the pandemic.

In November 2019, more than 55 million Americans traveled more than 50 miles during the Thanksgiving weekend, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

That was less than half of the 115 million people who traveled during the Christmas and New Year's season last year.

While the total numbers are expected to be down, a doubling of travelers at Christmas would be troubling. Thanksgiving trips average three days between two points. The average Christmas trip is six days with multiple stops.

The increase of COVID-19 cases in Oregon reflects a worldwide rise in infections. In the U.S., 12.6 million have been infected and over 260,000 have died, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

Worldwide, 60 million have become infected and 1.4 million have died.

Though the United States accounts for only 4% of the world's population, it has 21% of COVID-19 cases worldwide and 18% of all deaths.

Three major pharmaceutical companies have announced they could have a vaccine approved for use by the end of the year. Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca say that with federal approval, they could begin shipping the first doses immediately.

The initial batches in the low millions would go to

COUNTY RISK LEVELS

Extreme Risk (21)

Baker
Benton
Clackamas
Columbia
Deschutes
Douglas
Grant
Jackson
Jefferson
Klamath
Lane
Linn
Malheur
Marion
Multnomah
Polk
Umatilla
Union
Wasco
Washington
Yamhill

High Risk (6)

Clatsop
Coos
Crook
Lake
Hood River
Josephine

Moderate Risk (4)

Curry
Harney
Lincoln
Morrow

Lower Risk: (5)

Gilliam
Sherman
Tillamook
Wallowa
Wheeler

Unreported: Vaccine doses coming in December

Continued from Page A1

total cases that month.

"Our staff takes a lot of pride in their jobs, and when their task is to follow up with everybody, find their close contacts, find out who they're talking to, they get discouraged when they spend all their time trying to do that and aren't able to do so," Fiumara said.

Although reported daily case counts have been lower in the past few months, Fiumara said the percentage of people who are not cooperating with contact tracers has increased in the county on average, raising concerns heading into a winter that has already shown record-high case counts, hospitalizations and reported deaths in the rest of Oregon.

Since Nov. 1, Oregon's average daily case count has increased from 475 cases per day to 1,305 cases per day, as of Thursday, Nov. 26. In that same period, the number of Oregonians hospitalized with the virus has increased from 180 to 521, and the average weekly testing positivity rate increased from 8.1% to 16.4%, according to an Oregonian/OregonLive database that is tracking public health data throughout the pandemic.

Now in the second week of the state-mandated "freeze" initiated by Gov. Kate Brown to curb the rapid spread of infection, Fiumara said he's unsure if the benefit of an overarching lockdown to slow the spread statewide

outweighs the harm that will fall on businesses and families in Umatilla County.

"Our county commissioners have been very vocal that they believe the economic impacts from this are more harmful to our county than COVID is being," Fiumara said. "Now, I think so far they have been right. The danger of what the state is trying to do is what's going to happen in the future."

Fiumara said when he heard the orders from Brown, he had several questions. He wondered if it was best to close facilities like restaurants, bars and gyms

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— Joe Fiumara, Umatilla County public health director

if the data wasn't showing those facilities to be the primary source of outbreaks. He said he would be in favor of restrictions with more specifics geared to individual counties.

"There's a difference for us in the surge now compared to the surge in July," he said. "Most of the surge in July was driven by essential workers. We're definitely seeing a much bigger uptick (now) in social gatherings and so forth. And I think that's been the case for the state throughout this (pandemic)."

According to Fiumara,

the county health department has determined that since the start of the pandemic, nearly 100 cases in Umatilla County have been tied to parties alone. However, this is likely fewer than the actual number, as people at several parties refused to tell the health department who else had attended.

"That makes us feel like there's more of this going on than we're aware of," he said. "We're what, eight, nine, 10 months of 'Don't go anywhere, don't do anything.' And at a certain point, people get tired of it."

But there is some hope. As

mechanisms.

"The technology we use has improved a crazy amount," he said, reflecting on trials in past decades, which often take years to produce a distributable vaccine that is safe for public use. "That by itself tells me that we should be able to do it faster than we've ever done it before. That doesn't remove the safety concerns, but it does make it plausible."

One of Fiumara's biggest concerns, however, is whether the vaccine will even make it to rural communities like Eastern Oregon. Some vaccines have to remain in a deep-freeze state throughout the shipping process.

State officials in a press conference with Gov. Brown on Wednesday, Nov. 25, confirmed that Oregon will receive limited shipments of the first COVID-19 vaccine from the federal government in December. Patrick Allen, the director of the Oregon Health Authority, said authorities are still waiting for the vaccine to be authorized for emergency use, but added the vaccine appears to be "safe and effective." Frontline health care workers will be the first to receive the vaccine, followed by vulnerable populations, such as nursing home residents and essential workers.

"If the efficacy holds, and we truly get a vaccine that is 90 to 95% effective, that will allow us to eradicate this virus," Fiumara said. "We're planning for the worst and hoping for the best."

Dinner:

Continued from Page A1

separate bag of sides."

For those unable to come pick up meals themselves, Gary Humphreys, the Community Fellowship Dinner board chairman, oversaw the scheduling and delivery of roughly 200 meals to area residents.

"It went pretty well," he said. "It got a bit slow in the middle before picking up at the end."

Humphreys has been a part of the Community Fellowship Dinner since his mother dragged him along in 1985, and the idea stuck. Over the years, Humphreys kept coming back and brought his family on board to help out.

While Humphreys and Cassen have been longtime volunteers, the limits on



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

John and Nancy Lauck hand out Thanksgiving meals to people during the Community Fellowship Dinner in Hermiston on Thursday, Nov. 26, 2020.

travel and gathering size led John and Nancy Lauck, who usually travel out of the area for the holidays, to come and help volunteer at the Community Fellowship Dinner.

"We've always admired the event and with the inability to travel this year, it seemed like the perfect time

to lend a hand," said Nancy Lauck. "It's wonderful to get the chance to help. It's rewarding and helps people out."

The Hermiston High School football team and a group of missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also

donated time to volunteer to help make sure the event went off without a hitch.

"We're really grateful to both groups for all of their help and hard work," Humphreys said.

In Pendleton, the Salvation Army spent the morning turning out roughly 200 meals for delivery and take-out. Maj. Toni Halstad said the Salvation Army has been busier than usual delivering its daily meals during the pandemic.

"We knocked it out and got it all together," he said. "We didn't have any issues getting meals made and put together."

Halstad said the Salvation Army delivered roughly 90 meals, with a few dozen getting picked up by walk-up diners.

"It went really well and we didn't run into any issues," he said.