

Oregon expecting \$38 million in federal stimulus vaccine funds

By JES BURNS
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon is expecting to receive a large chunk of federal stimulus money this week to help pay for its COVID-19 vaccination program.

Congress approved \$3 billion for states to use for vaccine activities under the supplemental pandemic stimulus bill that went into law in late December. Oregon's share of those funds is \$38.1 million, although only a portion of that is expected to be distributed this week.

"Particularly now, it is crucial that states and communities have the resources they need to conduct testing, and to distribute and administer safe, high-quality COVID-19 vaccines safely and equitably," CDC Director Robert Redfield said in a statement by the agency.

The money can be used to promote and track as well as to distribute and administer the vaccines. The latter is where Oregon's vaccination program has bogged down.

The state has struggled to vaccinate large numbers of people, although by late last week it was able to hit the 12,000 doses-per-day vaccination target put forth by Gov. Kate Brown.

Oregon Health Authority Chief Medical Officer Dana Hargunani cited challenges with vaccine distribution as well as navigating scheduling, physical distancing at vaccination sites and the observation period required immediately after

the vaccine is administered.

OHA Director Patrick Allen told OPB's "Think Out Loud" on Jan. 15 that the federal money would go towards staffing and backfilling positions that have been reassigned to the vaccination effort.

"Much of that money gets shared with local public health and community-based organizations and others to do that work," he said. "Hospitals have been doing a lot of work on their own dime that we'll need to be able to pay for."

OHA will also use the money on public outreach promoting the vaccine.

As of Jan. 15, OHA reported 15,789 Oregonians have been fully vaccinated (receiving both necessary doses for maximum protection) with another nearly 139,000 people having received the first dose. But plans to expand the pool of Oregonians eligible for vaccination have been stymied by recent revelations that states would not receive an expected increase in vaccine shipments from the national stockpile — because there is no national stockpile. Oregon was expecting 200,000 additional doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Allen said the supply of vaccines from the federal government is now the biggest limiting factor to Oregon's vaccination push.

The stimulus bill also provides \$243 million to Oregon for COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, surveillance and containment efforts.

State makes in-person instruction easier

New guidance lowers COVID-19 bar for schools

By ELIZABETH MILLER
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — School districts around the state had been waiting on the Tuesday, Jan. 19, update to Oregon's "Ready Schools, Safe Learners" guidance.

The new guidance lowers the bar for districts to bring students back to the classroom for in-person instruction.

Health and safety protocols, like wearing face masks and learning in cohorts, remain required by the Oregon Department of Education. But metrics for reopening remain advisory. That continues Gov. Kate Brown's move last month to leave final decisions on reopening schools to local districts.

"We all know that in-person instruction provides our children and families with access to an equitable education," said ODE Director Colt Gill in a release announcing the updated guidance.

"Schools are a center of services to students and families, offering nutritious meals, access to social-emotional and mental health supports, as well as physical health services. This guidance provides new resources to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and better meet students' needs in this time."

The state's new guidance says districts should still consider community case counts before reopening — but lowers the bar for COVID-19 case rates recommended for hybrid learning, especially for Oregon's youngest students.

Now, schools are advised to begin reopening for "elementary on-site and hybrid transition" when county case counts per 100,000 are 350 or below.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Sunridge Middle School teacher Katie Bodewig leads a math lesson from her classroom in Pendleton on Sept. 9, 2020.

The previous metrics set the metrics for a transition to "limited in-person instruction" at 200 or below. County test positivity requirements have changed too.

These updated advisory metrics align with recommendations from the Harvard Global Health Institute, according to the Oregon Department of Education. These relaxed metrics allow in-person elementary instruction with higher COVID-19 case rates than previous metrics.

ODE said the changes align with recommendations from the Harvard Global Health Institute.

According to weekly metrics reported by the Oregon Health Authority, these metrics allow for reopening in several Oregon counties, including Multnomah County.

Portland Public Schools, the largest district in Multnomah County and Oregon, previously announced a plan to offer limited in-person instruction for some students.

The new guidelines

received a "mixed" reception from ED 300, a parents' group that's been pushing the state to adopt less rigid guidelines and to allow more local control in school reopening decisions.

On one hand, the group said, "Parents are encouraged by the revisions that permit the state's youngest learners to return to in-person learning in both hybrid and full-time models," in a statement provided by co-founder Rene Gonzalez.

But the approach to older students has the parent group arguing that the last 10 months out of school has already harmed the academic development and mental health of thousands of students.

"We continue to be very concerned that the state of Oregon is writing off a generation of middle-schoolers and high-schoolers particularly in larger counties," Gonzalez said, referring to the higher case counts and greater difficulty of reopening in more populous counties. Gonzalez and others in the parents'

group are advocating for not just a resumption of instruction for older students, but a return of sports, activities and academic counseling.

For schools that choose to reopen for hybrid learning despite high case counts, they must offer access to on-site COVID testing for symptomatic students and staff, plus those with known exposure to COVID-19.

ODE recommends a 14-day window before returning to in-person instruction.

"This will support district planning, family communication, and a more gradual—rather than rushed—opening," according to the guidance.

In a message to families on Jan. 19, Beaverton School District asked for time in allowing staff to consider ODE's guidance. They also addressed frustrations from parents seeing other school districts — both around the state and nationally — reopen. In addition, district officials cited a lack of liability protection around reopening.

IT'S IN YOUR INBOX before your mailbox



Sign up for free digital access
Call 800-781-3214

East Oregonian subscribers can receive daily email updates and uninterrupted digital delivery on a computer, tablet and smartphone

EAST OREGONIAN
EastOregonian.com/newsletters