

Educators: ‘I’ve been pushing for schools to be open already’

Continued from Page A1

in line that she was a little nervous about receiving a vaccine, but afterward, as she waited in her car for the all-clear to go home, she gave a thumbs up and said she was feeling good.

“It’s going much smoother than I expected,” she said of the clinic.

Caught up in contention

The series of vaccination drives is a watershed moment for schools, many of which were forced to teach most of their students online as the virus spread quickly throughout the county.

But the process has been mired in controversy as Gov. Kate Brown prioritized teachers over seniors for the vaccine in an attempt to accelerate the school reopening schedule.

Not everyone who showed up at the clinic was allowed one of the approximately 450 vaccine doses available. Several people peeled away from the main line after speaking with a screener and being told the event was only for educators and people in the Phase 1a category.

“I’m 84 and have diabetes, but I don’t qualify,” Sam Nobles said.

If the state fulfills the county’s follow-up request for more doses of the vaccine,

HSD ANNOUNCES SCHEDULE FOR RETURN OF STUDENTS

HERMISTON — Hermiston School District has released a schedule for returning kindergartners and first graders to the classroom part time.

Unless the Hermiston ZIP code’s COVID-19 cases see a significant spike in the next couple of weeks, the district plans to start hybrid learning for its two youngest grades on Feb. 16.

Students will be divided into two groups, with Group A learning on-site from 7:55-11:55 a.m., and then returning home for virtual school in the afternoons. Group B will learn from home in the morning and attend in person from 11:55 a.m. to 3:05 p.m. Fridays will be “flex” days, with all students learning from home.

The split schedule will allow the district to accommodate requirements for social distancing and keeping students in small “cohorts” to limit exposure if someone does get sick. To maintain those cohorts, students who get bussed to school will be included in Group A and students in walking distance in Group B. The district is also asking for parent volunteers to assist with screening students for symptoms and other duties. School staff will be reaching out to parents to confirm students wish to participate in hybrid learning. More information can be found online at hermiston.k12.or.us under the “HSD COVID info” tab.

—East Oregonian

Fiumara anticipates the health department will be able to vaccinate all the teachers who requested the vaccine, about half of the county’s school staff, very soon.

But with many local schools expanding their in-person offerings within the next week or two, most teachers will return to the classroom without having received the vaccine’s second dose, which fully inoculates recipients against the virus.

Given the ups and downs of the vaccine prioritization process, the heads of the county’s two largest teachers’ unions had mixed feelings.

“Nobody wants to get back to the classroom more than educators, but any return to

school needs to be done safely and equitably,” Pendleton Association of Teachers President Katie Bodewig said in a statement.

“Complete vaccination, meaning both required doses, in our workforce is a critical component to ensuring that our schools are able to reopen safely. Many of our teachers have elderly family members and have been deeply conflicted, and even troubled, by the Governor’s decision to push for schools to quickly reopen and to prioritize educators in the state’s vaccine distribution.

“However, this is the difficult decision she has made, and we are committed to following the plan she has laid

out for our state. Vaccination is just one public health measure needed to safely reopen our schools. It is equally essential that reopening plans include strong requirements for social distancing, cleaning and sanitizing, robust use of PPE, and provisions to ensure adequate ventilation in each of our classrooms.”

Laurel Woodward, Bodewig’s counterpart at the Hermiston Association of Teachers, shared similar sentiments.

“Access to a full course of the COVID-19 vaccine will bring a great sense of relief to many educators working in Hermiston schools, and will help keep our students and communities safe as we bring

kids back to the classroom,” she said in a statement.

“Of course, HAT would have preferred for Governor Brown to have prioritized vaccinating senior citizens and Oregon’s most vulnerable rather than her push to quickly reopen schools, but this is the course she has chosen. We are committed to continuing to serve our students during this transition, and we will work with the state and the district to ensure our return to in-person instruction is as safe as possible.”

Fiumara, the county’s public health director, said he does not think that immunizing educators before elderly residents is the right decision. He said elderly residents should be immunized “ahead or at least in line with” educators.

“I’ve been pushing for schools to be open already,” he said. “I think with the restrictions and the guidance in place, schools can operate with a measure of safety. I’m not saying there’s no risk.”

Fiumara said there is an inherent risk in allowing kids to return to schools. Although kids are less vulnerable to the symptoms of COVID-19, it is likely they could spread infection to their teachers or families, he said. However, he said the long-term impact of keeping kids out of schools will be more damaging than the

shortfalls of reopening.

“In my view, schools could have opened without teachers having to be vaccinated first,” he said.

Seniors will start getting vaccinated on Feb. 7, when Oregon residents age 80 and older will become eligible. Each week, a new group of younger seniors will be made eligible until March 7, when 65-year-olds qualify. Some seniors showed up at this week’s vaccination clinics for educators but were turned away as the county follows state guidelines.

Fiumara said he likes the state’s phased-in approach, but there will be new logistics to consider.

Seniors are a much larger cohort than teachers, and based on high participation rates during vaccine drives at elder care facilities, he anticipates demand will be significantly higher.

While a drive-thru format would accommodate seniors with mobility issues, Fiumara said the health department will have to consider whether the teacher test sites would be able to handle the increased volume of traffic.

And although it took teachers about 60 to 90 minutes to wind their way through line during high-traffic periods, Fiumara doesn’t want to have seniors wait as long in line to get their shot.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File
Morrow County Health Department registered nurse Erin Anderson administers a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at the Bartholomew Building in Heppner on Dec. 30, 2020.

Events:

Continued from Page A1

county officials said that the state was failing at its promises to immunize vulnerable minority communities. They emphasized that Morrow County’s Hispanic and Latino population had been hit especially hard by the virus.

Hispanic residents have accounted for approximately 560 of the county’s 979 total reported COVID-19 cases, according to county health officials. Five of the county’s 11 reported COVID-19 deaths were Hispanic residents over the age of 80, according to the health department.

Hispanic residents make up approximately 38% of the county’s population, according to 2019 U.S. Census data.

The disproportionate infection is partly because Hispanic and Latino residents make up for a sizable portion of the county’s essential workforce, county officials said, working in food factories and other large agricultural industries where the virus has been known to spread rapidly, and in some cases going home to multi-generational households afterward.

“If we want to talk equity, if we want to talk (Black, Indigenous and people of color), then we have to also talk about equitable distribution of the vaccine,” Lindsay said.

Smith said he was hearing the county’s concerns, and would take them back to the governor.

“All logic would dictate that you would focus on those areas with the greatest need,” he said. “It’s no different than if someone goes into the emergency room with a broken finger versus somebody having a heart attack. You’re going to deal with the heart attack first.”

When pressed for a response to the county offi-

cials’ complaints of equity, Allen said that the state’s Phase 1a guidelines were specifically designed to help minority communities and essential workers. He then turned the focus toward the efforts of individual counties, rather than the state.

“There may be a legitimate question about, is any individual county really being as thorough as it can to get through those populations and get through those disproportionately impacted people,” Allen said, adding that OHA had recently sent 100 doses to Morrow County, which is the minimum amount the state will send. “But the fact of the matter is if a county tells me that all we have left is 50 bus drivers ... I’ve got to send vaccines to other populations that are much further behind in the 1a category.”

Smith said that he wasn’t sure if Allen was the right person to hold his position, saying that the director lacked public health knowledge and experience.

“He may be a wonderful gentleman, but he’s not the right person for the job,” Smith said. “If we’re going to get through this in a logical fashion, we need to have people at the helm who understand public health. And I have to share with you, I’m not convinced he’s the person for the job.”

County officials said they contacted the state earlier this week, indicating that they had successfully immunized the majority of their educators and Phase 1a group and were prepared to move on and immunize elderly residents at upcoming events.

The state responded by cancelling the county’s upcoming shipment of 600 doses, according to county officials, forcing Morrow County to cancel the events.

“With the events we had, people were lined up around the block, figuratively speak-

ing,” Doherty said. “But now we’ve got to close the door and reach out to the few folks we can get ahold of with the few vaccines remaining.”

Morrow County’s canceled shipment came as Gov. Kate Brown on Jan. 27 ordered 32,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines redirected to the Portland area — where thousands of health care workers have yet to receive the vaccine due to a shortage of doses — instead of going to other parts of the state.

Some of the doses meant for Portland will be from a new shipment authorized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

House Republicans on Twitter decried the state’s move, saying that officials were prioritizing urban Oregon over rural. In a joint statement, Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod and House Republican Leader Christine Drazen called the move an “insult” to rural communities and was “unfair.”

At the same time, other counties were inoculating groups further down the priority list because of excess doses on hand.

“Health care workers and Phase 1a individuals across the state have always been my top priority for vaccination,” Brown said.

The Portland area would receive 17,000 additional shots for health care workers and 15,000 for teachers and school staff.

“That’s currently about 60% of the 53,000 first doses to be sent around the state next week, reflecting the large number of health care workers and individuals from vulnerable populations in the region,” Brown said.

It is unclear when Morrow County will be receiving their next shipment, officials said.

— Oregon Capital Bureau reporter Gary Warner contributed to this report.

Republicans: ORP gets attention

Continued from Page A1

Oregon Republican Party’s official statement.

“There is no credible evidence to support false flag claims,” the letter said. “Oregon is in crisis. Vaccines are not going to our most vulnerable, our students are still not in a safe classroom setting, Main Street businesses are in a tailspin, our health data is a mess and here we are, talking about a political party resolution.”

Umatilla and Morrow counties are represented by two of the House Republicans who signed the statement pushing back on false flag claims, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, and Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo. Smith told the *East Oregonian* that it isn’t the first time he has been at odds with the Oregon GOP — in 2009 the party chair called for his resignation, which he did not give.

Smith’s habit of working with people across the aisle causes consternation for some members of his party, and he doesn’t line up with the rhetoric of the statement put out by the state party. But he said he also gets an “A plus” on party platform issues, such as gun control.

“I’m really trying to figure out where I fit in as a pro-life, pro-gun, pro-business, pro-ag conservative who also wants to work with people on the other side,” he said.

He said he’s not the only Republican feeling that way, and he believes other conservatives who reflect the party of Reagan, Bush, Eisenhower and other past Republican presidents need to speak up and let people know the party isn’t just those “loud” voices making inflammatory statements.

With Republicans facing a Democratic supermajority in both chambers of the Oregon Legislature just as the 2021 session began,

many GOP lawmakers complained the state party was trying to score national political points instead of working to win Oregon elections.

“It’s none of our business what U.S. House Representatives from other states do,” Rep. Bill Post, R-Keizer, wrote in a blog post demanding an agenda reset. “Focus, please.”

The Senate did not make a group statement, but some also were angry with the timing, topic and tone of the attack.

“I have not seen any credible evidence to suggest that the riot at the United States Capitol was a ‘false flag,’” said Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend. “I do not support the Oregon Republican Party’s resolution. I find it disheartening that while Oregonians are struggling, these political distractions get in the way of helping them recover.”

When asked his thoughts, Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, said the entire issue was a distraction from work that needed to be done during the current legislative session in Oregon, and said he was “absolutely opposed” to rioting by people of any political position.

“The fact for me is the violence,” vhe said. “It doesn’t matter who caused it, it was wrong.”

Republican lawmakers said they were blindsided by the Oregon Republican Party pronouncement. They were never consulted or even told in advance what was coming from the party’s 22-member executive committee of GOP activists.

Despite the sharply conservative tone of the statement, state GOP chairman Bill Currier has been criticized by some activists as not being conservative enough by requiring a litmus test on issues important to the party’s increasingly Trump-oriented base.

Currier said he believes the party needed to be a “big tent” that can create winning coalitions with unaffiliated voters and disenchanted Democrats.

“We need to be more focused on issues rather than trying to decide whether some given candidate meets some litmus test,” he said. “The party doesn’t pick the candidates, the voters do.”

Critics within the party say the hard right turn on the current version of the Republican Party would reject Oregon icons like Gov. Tom McCall and Sen. Mark Hatfield, who spearheaded environmental reforms and equal rights issues.

The ultimate fallout on the controversy won’t be known for a while. Voters don’t go to the polls again for major partisan offices until the May 2022 primaries.

Jim Moore, a professor at Pacific University, studies public reactions to politics as outreach director from a base named after one of those long-ago Republicans: The Tom McCall Center for Civic Engagement.

“The biggest impact of the ‘false flag’ assertion will be it driving more moderate Republicans out of the party — those that are still left after five years of Trump and decades of a party moving to the right on all issues,” he said.

Winning elections is tough for Republicans in Oregon today. But the party’s scant presence in Salem and Washington was given a jolt by the claims.

“That all being said, the Oregon Republican Party is getting international notice with its incendiary public pronouncements,” Moore said. “The measure of how that is working out will be simple — does it bring in money to the ORP coffers.”

— East Oregonian reporter Jade McDowell contributed to this report.

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