

# Agape House: 'It's pretty amazing. People are very, very grateful'

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this," Jose Garcia, chair of the Hispanic Advisory Committee in Hermiston, said as he looked out at the gathering workers.

In June 2020, Garcia recognized that because of the pandemic, farmworkers could not come get supplies from the Agape House, a local nonprofit food bank. So, he began working with the Agape House to reach out to the thousands of local Hispanic and Latino agricultural workers.

The workers carried boxes of bread, Raisin Bran, beans, rice, vacuum-sealed meats and fruits and vegetables to their cars. Dust from the work day still clung to their boots and jeans. Some brought their children, who played with belts, shirts and pants spilling out of stacked cardboard boxes, while parents checked sizes, laughed and chatted together. Nearly all came from Guatemala or Mexico.

Every two weeks, Agape House gives Garcia enough food and clothing for 120 families. In all, Agape House Executive Director Mark Gomolski estimates they have provided supplies to approximately 4,800 people.

"It's pretty amazing,"



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian  
Jose Garcia, left, and Rafael Romero, center, gather masks and hand sanitizer for a group of farmworkers at New Horizons in Hermiston on Friday, March 19, 2021.

said Gomolski, who also serves as vice chair of the Hispanic Advisory Committee. "People are very, very grateful."

Garcia, an addiction counselor at New Horizons, estimates between 20 to 30 families come by when supplies are offered at New Horizons every two weeks. Workers are also provided with personal protective equipment supplied by the

county health department.

It's an effort to help a community that has been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Garcia says. In 2020, residents reporting Hispanic ethnicity accounted for 41% of Umatilla County's total COVID-19 cases. The population also contracted the virus at a rate over three times higher than non-Hispanics, according to data

from the county health department

And Hermiston was hit hardest. The ZIP code encompassing the town reported more COVID-19 cases than any other in the county in 2020. Most of those cases came in the summer, when the area reported one of the highest testing positivity rates in Oregon.

Residents reporting Hispanic ethnicity had the

greatest number of Umatilla County's cases in every month from April through August 2020. In July, the population tested positive at a rate nearly four-and-a-half times higher than non-Hispanics.

Health officials have said that the bulk of the cases during the summer months were being traced back to agricultural workplaces and food processing facilities, where infection has been known to spread rapidly and Oregon Health Authority frequently reported large outbreaks.

Researchers nationally have pointed to socioeconomic status and workplace exposures as having contributed to the pandemic's disproportionate impact on Hispanic and Latino communities.

Gov. Kate Brown announced in a Friday, March 22, press conference that migrant and seasonal farmworkers would be eligible to start receiving the COVID-19 vaccine starting March 22, speeding up the state's timeline as more groups of essential workers become eligible in the coming weeks. The move comes in response to the disproportionate affect the pandemic has had on essential workers in

marginalized communities.

Officials at the Umatilla County health department have started contacting agricultural and food processing facilities to make plans for bringing the vaccine to these communities starting next week, according to Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director.

And although infection rates have declined overall in the county, the pandemic has yet to fully abate from some agricultural areas.

Valentin Alonzo, who came to Hermiston from Guatemala nearly five years ago with his wife and three kids, said that five of his co-workers contracted the virus less than a month ago. Although Alonzo recognizes the severity of the virus, and the impact it's had on local farmworkers, he said he is not worried.

"There is a passage in the Bible that says, if you come to me, don't fear, because I will protect you from anything," he said through a translator.

Garcia watched some of the last boxes of supplies be carried away, counting how many were once sitting on the tables. He uttered a phrase that would summarize the day.

"Fifteen boxes, 15 families."

## Vaccine:

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of vaccine to the state.

Brown on March 19 ordered many of the 530,000 people covered in the next eligibility group moved up from March 29 to Monday, March 22. OHA Director Pat Allen told state lawmakers on March 17 that Brown was considering moving up the date as a way to get the groups at least a short head start before opening the eligibility to all.

Under Brown's new timeline, vaccinations can begin for migrant and seasonal farmworkers in counties where they are currently already working.

People age 45-64 with underlying health conditions can get vaccinated in counties that can attest they have "largely" vaccinated those age 65 and older. The Oregon Health Authority did not have additional information on what standards were required to meet that threshold. OHA also said it did not have a list of counties that currently meet the standard.

Another 550,000 people, who were to be eligible on May 1, have had their start date moved to April 19.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said the county was already planning on expanding eligibility next week regardless of

the state's timelines. He said he was glad to hear of the state's new timeline, but added he was frustrated that the county will have to wait until March 22 to attest to the state to expand eligibility, days before the county had already scheduled events with new groups receiving the vaccine.

"We don't think that everybody over 65 who wants (a vaccine) has gotten one," he said. "But we think enough of them have that we're starting to run into folks who don't want it at this time. And there's enough folks beyond them that still want (the vaccine) that we don't want to keep holding them up."

He added the county has already been reaching out to food processing and agricultural workplaces to offer vaccines to local farm workers at their workplaces starting next week.

"Those are the populations that have been most hit by" the pandemic, he said. "Especially in our area. We need to be able to give them vaccine."

However, Fiumara said in order for eligibility to continue ramping up, the county simply needs to receive more doses moving forward.

"We don't have enough vaccine for all of this yet," he said. "And the concern is that we won't. Hopefully we will."

East Oregonian reporter Bryce Dole contributed to this report.

## B2H:

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said there was one property owner left who had yet to accept a proposal from UEC. If the cooperative isn't able to convince the landowner to voluntarily sign an agreement, eminent domain may be an option for UEC.

"That's certainly not a goal of Umatilla Electric," Echenrode said.

He said the 16-page order from the Public Utility Commission "speaks for itself" on the importance of the line. According to the order, UEC stated that the line was needed to handle current and future growth in the area, and that the cooperative examined three routes and determined that the planned route is "justified by the comparative cost, benefit to its system and is the least impactful in terms of property, environmental and agricultural considerations."

Some affected property owners disagreed. Several of them told the *East Oregonian* last year that a large, high-voltage transmission line running through their property would lower its value, cause a nuisance for them and in

some cases interfere with their plans for construction on their property. They argued the line was mostly to benefit a single customer's data centers rather than the community at large.

The order from the Public Utility Commission details testimony against the plan from the Frederickson and Tallman families, who argued that UEC should go with a route that affects industrial land more than farmland.

The commission sided with UEC, however, and granted the certificate.

Echenrode said besides securing the final private property easement needed — either through an agreement signed with the landowner or through eminent domain proceedings — the cooperative still needs to secure various permits, including ones needed from Bonneville Power Administration to cross their lines, one to cross Interstate 84 and one from the Bureau of Reclamation to cross a canal.

He said he believes the project falls within the rules of each permit, however, and expects them all to come through. After everything is in place, construction of the line would likely take less than 12 months, he said, barring any unforeseen holdups with supplies or labor.

## Summer: Whisky Fest still planned for July

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Round-Up Publicity Director Pat Reay didn't respond to a voicemail requesting comment, but at a joint meeting between the Pendleton City Council and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees, Pendleton Mayor John Turner, an ex-officio member of the Round-Up Board of Directors, gave a short update on the Round-Up's planning process.

Turner said the Round-Up board is studying the safety plans of other large outdoor rodeos, like Cheyenne Frontier Days, as they try to formulate their own. Turner said early discussions include logistics like a temperature checkpoint and whether attendees need to wear masks.

Tribal participation is also a significant part of the Round-Up and Boots Pond, an at-large member of the Board of Trustees, said he's on a subcommittee with other tribal members that is working with the rodeo on what that participation will look like.

Pond said the subcommittee is expecting to receive a draft plan from the Round-Up in April, and after input from the subcommittee's members, a final draft in July.

Kat Brigham, the chair of the Board of Trustees, said the tribal government is looking to coordinate more with Round-Up ahead of the next rodeo.

### Pendleton Whisky Music Fest still a go

Last year was supposed to rival 2018 for the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest's biggest year, but it wasn't to be.

When Whisky Fest canceled its 2020 event, it retained headliners Eric Church and Macklemore for a rescheduled 2021 concert. Whisky Fest is still advertising a July 10 concert, but co-founder Doug Corey said he's still waiting on word from the state.

"We're full steam ahead — if they let us go," he said.

Corey said Whisky Fest is reliant on ticket sales to make the concert financially feasible, and if attendance is capped at a level too far below the Round-Up arena's capacity, organizers might not be able to stage the event.

Corey said large event organizers are supposed to meet with the governor's office by the end of March, and he hopes Whisky Fest will have more clarity on 2021 following the meeting.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File  
Whisky Fest spectators wait for Post Malone to take the stage on July 13, 2019, at the Round-Up Arena.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File  
A member of the Seattle Cossacks Motorcycle Stunt and Drill Team rides his Harley Davidson in a circle pivoting about his foot during a performance at the 2019 Pendleton Bike Week.

### Farm-City Pro Rodeo moving forward

On the west side of the county, Farm-City Pro Rodeo board member Dennis Barnett said the rodeo will go on in Hermiston in August.

"There will be a rodeo, we just don't know if there will be no fans, or some fans or 100%," he said.

Barnett said there have already been other rodeo events held at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center without fans present since the pandemic began, establishing a precedent for using the arena. So the board is making three plans — one for an event with no spectators, one for partial capacity, and one for an event that looks like years past.

"We owe it to the cowboys, we owe it to the contractors, because they need to make a living too," he said.

Barnett said the Farm-City Pro Rodeo has not received any government money to support the event, despite its complete cancellation last year. So if event organizers can't sell any tickets this year or half the usual amount, it will fall to sponsors to make up the difference.

Fortunately, he said,

sponsors he has met with so far have all been very supportive.

The rodeo takes place each year in tandem with the Umatilla County Fair, held on the same dates, also at EOTEC. Fair Manager Angie McNaalley has said the fair board is also moving forward with plans on the assumption that there will be a "fair that looks like a fair" in August, even if there are some regulations in place regarding social distancing, capacity, sanitation and other safety measures.

### Pendleton Bike Week unsure about 2021 event

Pendleton Bike Week is in a similar boat to Whisky Fest.

Under new ownership, the 2020 bike week was supposed to shift from the Pendleton Convention Center to the Round-Up Grounds and feature more affordable entry prices.

But bike week owner Stuart Rice had to cancel the 2020 event and he's not sure about the 2021 event either.

Pendleton Bike Week is still advertising July 15-18 event dates, but Rice said he wants to wait until he hears from the governor before proceeding.

### Other events take wait-and-see approach

While some summer events are taking a wait-and-see approach, other smaller spring and early summer events are moving forward.

Jackalope Jamboree, a music festival that held its inaugural event in 2019, is already selling tickets for its June 25-26 shows at the Happy Canyon Arena on its website, according to co-founder Rian Beach.

"Fortunately, we were able to retain Shane Smith & the Saints as the Friday headliner, who played the first year of our festival and were a crowd favorite," he wrote in an email. "And we were able to book Shooter Jennings to headline for Saturday at this year's festival! We also have been able to add a handful of great acts that weren't on the 2020 bill."

Beach wrote that all attendees will need to wear masks to the arena, which will operate at a reduced capacity.

Even earlier in the calendar, the Pendleton Cattle Barons is gearing up to restart on April 30. The two-day event will feature its usual mix of rodeo, horse auctions and trade shows with the goal of raising money for college scholarships.

Andy VanderPlaat, the president of the Cattle Barons, said organizers were motivated to do this year's events after hearing from sponsors and past scholarship recipients about how much the event meant to them.

"Agriculture is the backbone of Eastern Oregon," he said.

VanderPlaat said the 2021 event will look similar to past events, just with more events shifted outdoors to comply with COVID-19 protocols.

VanderPlaat said he hopes it will be a springboard for other Eastern Oregon events to relaunch.