

OUR VIEW

Where do we go from here?

Data accumulated by Umatilla County Health Department recently showed area Hispanic residents made up a disproportionately high number of COVID cases during the past year, raising troubling questions about the response to the pandemic.

And while the statistics are sobering and there appear to be specific reasons as to why the Hispanic community was hit so hard, the real question now is — where do we go from here?

Residents who listed Hispanic ethnicity made up 41% of the county's total COVID-19 cases last year. That's compared with 34% of cases among non-Hispanic residents. The county's Hispanic population also tested positive for the virus at a rate three times higher than non-Hispanic residents last year.

County leaders reported for months the county's Hispanic and Latino population was hit hard by the virus, but proved to be hesitant to release the data because of a fear a stigma would be created. While that rationale is noble, it is hardly in line with total transparency and flies in the face of what matters most in a democracy — the truth.

If data is collected by agencies and individuals supported by taxpayer dollars it should be released as soon as possible. There isn't a counterargument. Not a fear of stigma or some other justification. The public has a right to know all there is to know during a pandemic. But that hasn't happened on a regular basis, either at the federal level or the state level.

The state often points to its vast array of COVID-19 dashboards on the Oregon Health Authority website as a panacea in transparency, but there have been times in the past where information — especially about specific ethnic groups and COVID-19 — was hidden.

Which brings us back to the high rate of COVID-19 infection among Hispanics and the key question — where do we go from here?

What the public needs to know is what processes or procedures is the state and the county going to create to address this challenge? When will they enact these procedures? The public needs to see a very detailed plan about how our elected leaders and other state and county agencies are going to solve this issue.

The Hispanic and Latino community is a key part of our success as a region. They are us. So, we know the how and the why, but we don't know what the solution will be. Let's work together to find out.



Healing support, no matter where



REGINA BRAKER
ANOTHER MILE

It seems so long ago, but it's been just a year since local folks came together to perform "The Sound of Music" at College Community Theater at Blue Mountain Community College.

This musical theatre effort involved people of all ages, with the cast coming together not only with musical and theatrical talents, learning dance steps, but also working behind the scenes getting costumes and set pieces made. And while the audience tends to notice the lead actors in the ensemble, there are so many others who blend into the background, perhaps go unnoticed, but bring important support to the effort.

That's the case for so much that goes on in communities across our region. My friend Catherine is this kind of person, the quiet participant whose care for others makes her an important link within her family, her work life, and the personal interests she pursues. I wonder if her occupation in the medical profession has something to do with that. I've noticed recently how many people in the field of nursing, for example, who seem to take that concern from their profession into everything they do.

I got to know Catherine through our involvement in local choral groups, and then we spent some time pre-pandemic in social knitting. She often shared

who to get to know or what group to get involved with in our town, and knew people across the spectrum, taking a genuine interest in how they were doing, and what was going on in their lives.

Catherine and her family came to Pendleton 40 years ago, after sojourns in the Midwest and Northwest in her early adult life with her husband. The couple followed educational opportunities for the requirements in their professions. For anyone who's thrived in a supportive family environment, it can be difficult to be far away from those we love as we take on the responsibilities of our adult lives.

Working in a large institutional environment where anonymity is the norm, having children far from grandparents who would lend support, moving yet again to complete a last credential, all of this combines for stressful circumstances. When dire events darken that reality further, so much becomes tenuous. Finding healing and the possibility of happiness becomes a long and arduous journey.

Catherine told me that her sister encouraged her to allow her most painful experiences to be the source of blessing, and look to understand its spiritual impact on her. In the years that followed as life settled into cherished routines, she was able to experience this wisdom in her occupation, as she worked in small rural health centers, where patient interaction in the health care environment extends into the community, during interactions at other events and gatherings.

The ability to be a part of her patients'

care not only through work, but also through the empathy she gained from her own difficult healing journey, has enlarged and deepened her concern for others. Catherine's interests extend into projects she's been involved in — prison education programs, which she views as so valuable, as they bring together so many community entities along with volunteer groups as resources to meet the manifold needs of the prison population.

Catherine also sees an important impact of so many community members she has met who are working to provide food and shelter for the unsheltered population here. There are many venues for us to add our efforts, among which include Outreach, the Salvation Army, Altrusa, Stillman dinners, and many services provided by various churches and faith communities.

Especially in this year, when so many have lost so much, her sense of compassion is heightened. She told me about Christmas night driving home and seeing a man alone with a backpack and wondering where he might be going and why he was alone. In her thoughts she reached out to him, and thought of others in this community who are helping the houseless.

Something she said about her work that took her beyond the 9 to 5 stay with me. They are words we can ponder for ourselves, "It is not just a job. You're contributing to people's lives."

Regina Braker, a retired educator with journeys through many places and experiences, enjoys getting to know people along the way.

YOUR VIEWS

Understanding legislation takes effort

Maybe you say, "The government is making too many regulations that interfere with running my business the way I want." But really, who makes those decisions?

First, we voters vote for the politicians who we believe will work for us. We contribute to their campaign funds and write to the winners. At the same time, corporations and organizations also contribute campaign funds; however, with their money, they can hire lobbyists to influence legislation for their benefit. (This is what "Citizens United" is about.)

Much of the time, the lobbyists construct bills and hand them to the legislators, who submit them for the decision process. Do you think the lobbyists are promoting and writing legislation that benefits everyone? No, they propose and write legislation to benefit their employers. Do these employers and lobbyists stop to think about the effect their legislation will have on others? Who will benefit if their bill is put into law? Who will be hurt?

What about the bureaucrats, those who work for the government and do the "grunt work" to enable the decisions made by the politicians? Do they make too many decisions? For whom do they make decisions? My experience as a

former state bureaucrat is that my job was to do what the politicians assigned me to do. Almost every assignment was unpopular with various segments of the population because people have differing needs and expectations.

My advice to anyone who is unhappy with a regulation is to find out who influenced the passing of the bill that included the problem regulation, who it benefits, and why was the regulation included in the implementation of the legislation. What is your representative's position? Did you follow the legislation, and did you inform your representative of your point of view? And why did you vote for or against that representative, and did you vote? So you see, it all circles back to the responsible parties — the voters.

Being a responsible citizen is not easy.

Evelyn Swart
Joseph

Oregon needs tighter mink regulations

The Center for Biological Diversity is absolutely aiming to reshape how Oregon treats animals by seeking to end beaver trapping and hunting last year and this year improve how mink farms are regulated.

Here's why: COVID-19 can and has

been passed back and forth between humans and mink (this has already resulted in a viral mutation). COVID-19 has ravaged mink farms in Europe and the U.S. At least three mink escaped an Oregon mink farm that was quarantined following a COVID-19 outbreak (and two tested positive for COVID-19).

In addition to the threat of mink becoming a reservoir for COVID-19 mutations that may undo our human vaccination efforts, we're concerned that farmed mink could spread COVID-19 to wild mink and their relatives, like otters, fishers, martens and badgers, potentially decimating wild animal populations.

We've been through a lot this past year. A lot has changed. Many of us are thinking about what we want to keep changing. If we want to stop the next pandemic and get this one under control, we need to make changes to the facilities that provide ideal breeding grounds for pandemics.

Oregon's mink factory farms are a threat to public health and wildlife. Our petition to add mink to ODFW's prohibited species list and Senate Bill 832, the bill to close Oregon's mink farms and shift their workers to new employment, would reshape our relationship with animals to provide us all a safer future.

Lori Ann Burd
environmental health director,
Center for Biological Diversity

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