

Vaccination: Officials say vaccines are the best choice to keep students in class

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and Milton-Freewater.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation on May 12 announced its largest COVID spike in months — 14 new cases over the previous two weeks, with 12 cases coming from schoolchildren. The uptick prompted tribal officials to cancel events and immediately schedule a vaccine clinic for youth at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center that same weekend.

Many of the cases at schools are being traced back to extracurricular activities, such as sports, according to Umatilla County Public Health Director Fiumara. In recent months, a soccer team, dance team and football team in Pendleton and Hermiston high schools all had to quarantine because of COVID-19 outbreaks.

But it does not appear these cases are leading to infection spreading broadly throughout schools, said Fiumara. Nearly all of the county schools that had reported cases since the beginning of April reported single-digit totals, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Quarantined after cases; vaccines can help, officials say

In the Umatilla School District, about 100 students quarantined across all three of the district's schools when a sibling group got sick, according to Umatilla Superintendent Heidi Sipe.

Cases reported have so far appeared to come from exposures students had outside the classroom, she said, an indicator masks, social distancing and other safety



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Pendleton's Sarah House goes after the ball during a singles match against Ridgeview's Gaby Hoef in Pendleton on April 26, 2021.

measures were working.

Fritsch in Pendleton said quarantining is a major issue because it interrupts students' learning.

"I don't see any way around that," he said, "and I don't know that, in any future guidance, I don't think it's much of a stretch that we're going to have to exclude people that are sick from school."

Fiumara said the vaccine provides schools with much-needed protection that will lead to fewer outbreaks, adding "when classes shut down due to an uptick, it affects students whether they are sick or not."

The federal government cleared the way for the Pfizer vaccine's use among youths ages 12-15 on May 12. Since then, youth vaccinations have increased in the county. On May 21, the health department reported 382 people under the age

of 18 had been vaccinated.

Four days later, that number jumped to 653. And on June 3, the health department reported 801 children and minors had been vaccinated, or 3.5% of all vaccinated people in Umatilla County.

In addition, Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, which opened vaccine clinics to students in late March to curb school outbreaks before in-person classes began, reported 445 juveniles under the age of 18 have been vaccinated as of June 4.

"I think it's going to be really big coming into the fall when everybody is expecting and hoping that everything goes back to school in a normal fashion," Fiumara said of the Pfizer vaccine now being available for youth.

As the superintendent of the InterMountain Educa-

tion Service District, Mark Mulvihill often acts as a liaison between school districts in Umatilla, Morrow and Union counties and the state education system. Mulvihill said local schools have managed individual cases well, but he was disappointed by the county's vaccination rate, which for months has ranked among the lowest statewide. While schools have remained open despite the outbreaks, students' educations still are affected when they are forced to quarantine due to an exposure.

Mulvihill said he foresees this continuing to happen until residents take the necessary steps.

"Getting the vaccine is the way to end the pandemic," he said.

Mulvihill said he's heard plenty of chatter about what kind of rules the Oregon Department of Education

could have in store for next year. But one idea that hasn't been introduced to the table is a vaccine requirement.

Vaccines become contentious

For some students, the topic of vaccines has become contentious.

Muriel Jones-Hoisington, a 17-year-old three-sport athlete at Pendleton High School, says her friends sometimes argue about the COVID-19 vaccine.

She wanted to get the shot at first. But then she learned some people got sick even after being vaccinated. From May 3-31, 2% of Oregonians who had tested positive for COVID-19 had been fully vaccinated, according to state data.

She grew skeptical — like she wasn't getting the full picture. Her family has voiced skepticism, too, she said. And when she'd bring up the topic with friends, they would bicker.

"It was really odd to me, because they were like, 'I don't want to get made fun of for getting a vaccination,'" she said. "And I'm like, 'Well, it's your opinion. You shouldn't really get made fun of. That shouldn't stop you from doing what you want to do.'"

Now, universities statewide are requiring vaccinations for fall term. And vaccinated people are allowed to do things that unvaccinated people can't. She said she feels like her right to choose is being taken away.

"Everyone has their own options," she said. "They can pick and choose what they want to do and what they don't want to do. And that's just a human's right, to choose what you want to do. It makes me upset that

people feel the need to make other people's decisions, and not fully understand why they got it."

For Hoisington, who wants to be a nurse, she needs more time before she decides whether or not to get the vaccine. She wants to see more data. She wants schools to educate students and hold discussions about the shot, allowing for a common ground with different perspectives.

"I feel like it's good to talk about this stuff, instead of holding it in," she said. "I feel like you have to give both views of both sides. Why these people are getting it, and why they aren't getting it."

House, who is vaccinated, also said she believes people should have the right to choose whether or not they get the shot. Though she believes the vaccines are safe and effective, she understands how the politics and rapid development of the shot have driven people away, and she doesn't like how universities are requiring that students get vaccinated.

"I think that waiting is a choice," she said. "That's based on your own health and your own thoughts about it. And I think politics were surrounding it, which I think is kind of annoying. That shouldn't be guiding the health of people."

But if a vaccine means returning to a normal school year, House is all for vaccinations.

"I'd say, please do it," she said. "I just want to go to school, and I want to have a normal year next year. And I know that it's not going to be totally normal, but I would love it if we could do that."

VFW:

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tumultuous time for the Hermiston post. In February 2020, David Earl Bosley, the post's quartermaster in charge of finances, was charged with six felony theft charges and two misdemeanors after the Hermiston Police Department investigated allegations of embezzlement of tens of thousands of dollars from the post. State court records show the case is pending after Bosley did not show for an arraignment in July.

Afterward, state leadership put the post on probation. According to the letter from Carroll, the team "weeded out" members who had been "grossly negligent" and worked hard to fix past errors.

The post briefly came out from under its probation, but, according to the letter, afterward the post struggled to keep leadership positions filled and have a quorum at meetings.

"Sadly, this indicates the Post is not able to sustain a healthy membership that will work together," the letter stated.

Roberts disagrees with this narrative. He said after the post's probation ended, he brought in eight new members — an 8% increase

in membership. Their February 2021 meeting had about 20 members present, he said, which was more than enough for a quorum, and all leadership positions were filled. He said there also ere younger veterans who joined who were making plans to work on forming partnerships with area resource providers, par-

up and leave" if they didn't like something.

Roberts said for some reason Carroll and other state leaders did not like American Legion Post 37, another veterans organization that has many of the same members and often partnered with the VFW post on events. According to Roberts, after

Hamilton stepped into role.

Hamilton said he had been a member of the VFW for 12 years but had not been very active for a while until Roberts reached out to him. He said he and other younger veterans had big plans and are disappointed they were never able to put in place, including coffee gatherings for veterans, help getting counseling, and work with CAPECO to provide food and other assistance to veterans in need.

"We tried to get that going but they shut us down before we were able to get started," he said.

Jose Ortiz, the posts' quartermaster, also said it felt like the state leadership pulled the rug out from under them right as they were trying to get resources together that would have helped local veterans.

"Now we don't have a stable place to say, 'Come and meet with us,'" he said.

He said even if other posts, such as Pendleton, are willing to take in Hermiston-area members, there are elderly members who don't drive or have other barriers to traveling to meetings in another town.

Dennis Aiken, a member of the post since 2016, alleged the state VFW leadership had been told multiple times in years past of problems with the post, including the suspected embezzlement, and it is his belief they

"IF YOU'VE DONE TIME OVERSEAS, IF YOU'VE BEEN IN ACTION, THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH IS THE PEOPLE WHO WERE OVER THERE, TOO."

— Dennis Aiken, a member of the post since 2016

ticularly for mental health services.

"I got a call yesterday from a guy wanting to join, because one of my flyers was still existing at Les Schwab," he said. "This is an active VFW."

He said after a long period of lax oversight, it made sense for the state to step in and help the post get back on track after the embezzlement case. But they came in as "judge, jury and executioner," he said, and local members were not consulted on anything, or told to "shut

he allowed some American Legion members to speak at the VFW's February meeting, he was notified by Carroll that the post was going back on probation and American Legion's lease agreement to meet in the VFW building was terminated.

American Legion Post Commander Glenn Bradley confirmed the agreement was terminated by the state, over the objections of local VFW members.

At that point, Roberts resigned his position as post commander and Marvin

were hoping the problems got bad enough they would have an excuse to seize the post's valuable assets.

He said contention and management problems in recent years had made the Hermiston VFW more of a bingo hall with an occasional VFW meeting than an organization that truly served veterans' needs. He said he has been working with the Agape House when he finds veterans in need, instead of working through the VFW.

"Any real impact on veterans in this area will probably be positive as the loss of the post means the local contributors will have to find other charities that do, in fact, benefit veterans," he said in an email.

Other veterans are highly concerned about the loss of the post, however, and said it provided a social structure and other help to veterans that will be lost. Hamilton, the post's brief final commander, said he hopes people will call the national VFW organization and ask it step in to reverse the state department's decision so Hermiston-area veterans who participated in combat are able to have a place to gather once again.

"If you've done time overseas, if you've been in action," he said, "the only people who understand what you went through is the people who were over there, too."

Deputy:

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will have further information shortly as arrangements are made."

The Wallowa County Sheriff's Office, Umatilla County Sheriff's Office or other law enforcement agencies have yet to provide details on the accident that led to Post's death.

Ashly Lehman, wife of Pendleton police Sgt. Jon Lehman, set up a fundraiser at www.gofundme.com for the benefit of Post's wife, Rosana, and their baby, Dalilah.

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2021 EASTERN OREGON PHOTO CONTEST

Official Rules:
 Photo Contest open now and closes at 11:59 pm Sunday, June 20, 2021.
 Staff will choose the top 10. The public can vote online for People's Choice from 12:01 am Monday, June 21 through 11:59 pm Thursday, June 30.
 Digital or scanned photos only, uploaded to the online platform. No physical copies.
 Only photographers from Oregon may participate.
 The contest subject matter is wide open but we're looking for images that capture life in Eastern Oregon.

Entrants may crop, tone, adjust saturation and make minor enhancements, but may not add or remove objects within the frame, or doctor images such that the final product doesn't represent what's actually before the camera.

The winners will appear in the July 8th edition of Go Magazine; the top 25 will appear online.

Gift cards to a restaurant of your choice will be awarded for first, second and third place.

Submit all photos online at: eastoregonian.com/photocontest

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