

## Advocate:

Continued from Page A1

Lasater has been at the forefront of COVID-19 vaccination efforts in some of Umatilla County's smallest towns — Helix, Weston and Athena. Collectively, those three communities have a vaccination rate of just more than 50%, according to county health data.

Lasater estimates she has vaccinated nearly 300 people. That's nearly 30% of all vaccines delivered in those three communities, according to county health data.

A registered nurse at East Umatilla Fire and Rescue and former employee of the Umatilla County Public Health Department, Lasater volunteered to bring vaccines to the towns in northeast Umatilla County, taking the reins from the health department in May. Working in ambulance services, she has witnessed patients fall victim to COVID-19, which motivated her to help bring vaccines to her community.

"When I transport a patient to the ER," she said, "and (health care workers) are stressed and full to the brim with patients and they can't hardly breathe because they have so many things going on, it makes me want to do more prehospital to help reduce the number of patients that are hospitalized. And there's ways we can do that."

Lasater has traveled to people's homes for appointments, providing immunizations and vaccine information. She's spearheaded clinics at elementary schools, local pools and community halls, at times working alone or on her days off. Sometimes, few people show up. Lately, the turnout has improved.

"She's made so many sacri-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**Registered nurse and firefighter Rachel Lasater draws up a dose of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine Tuesday, Sept. 7, 2021, at the East Umatilla County Ambulance Area Health District in Athena.**

ces with so many clinics," said East Umatilla Fire and Rescue Chief Dave Baty, adding that Lasater often will set aside six hours in a day for vaccinations.

"When others on our crew see that she's setting up another clinic, they're checking their schedule to see if they can help out," Baty said. "She's the head of the spear, and there's a lot of people following her. Sometimes you have to break the trail, and after that, they'll follow."

She's also seen the vaccine become more and more politicized in the communities she serves. And she said state and federal efforts to improve vaccination rates, like incentives and mandates, could be driving more people in rural communities away from getting the job.

"If I could have them rewind, and if my voice meant anything to anyone in the upper parts of the state, I would say, 'Don't do that,'" she said. "If you want more people to get the vaccine, don't coerce them with money and stuff, because that makes

stuff seem suspicious. I think that's what's happening around here. People are unsure."

COVID-19 vaccination rates in Umatilla County have increased gradually over the last month, but remain sixth lowest in the state at just under 50%. Meanwhile, the county has reported record-breaking COVID-19 case counts, hospitalizations and deaths during the past month amid the delta crisis that has rocked Oregon's health care system.

"It's not as intimate when Portland tells Pendleton or Athena this is how you have to do things," she said of vaccines, adding, "I think it's more intimate in these rural communities. They trust who they trust because that's how it is out here. People just know what they know and trust who they've been going to. And if some bigger person comes in and says, 'No, that's not right, you have to do it this way,' It's hard for people to let go of that."

Lasater also was reluctant to get the shot, but decided she

wanted to do what she could to protect her loved ones from a disease that as of Thursday, Sept. 7 killed 118 Umatilla County residents. She said she believes the vaccine is effective and that, if there was better vaccine education, more people may change their minds.

"It's hard for people to know how to trust what they're hearing, reading or seeing without taking time to look into it themselves," Lasater said. She always points people toward reputable health sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for information, and away from Facebook, a platform ripe with misinformation.

"I'm not sure a lot of people are willing or comfortable to do that," she said. "Research is a lot of work and I don't think people have that time."

That's why she's passionate about informing her community, she says.

An example of localized efforts working, she says, is Helix. With less than 200 residents, the community has the highest percentage of residents vaccinated in the county, exceeding 70%, according to county data.

Lasater, along with local health care workers and local community groups, led two vaccine efforts at the Helix pool. Groups that participated in these efforts were the first to be rewarded in the county's vaccine incentive program, which funds groups when the ZIP code encompassing the town reaches the 60% vaccine threshold.

"I feel that, being more personable as a health district, getting our faces out there and talking to people, has helped us direct people to resources," Lasater said. "I think it's helped them to trust us more, and when we're doing clinics, they feel

## Sheriffs:

Continued from Page A1

"Business and property owners have a right to set ground rules for how people behave in their businesses," Morrow County Sheriff Ken Matlack said. "When a person becomes disruptive because of this issue, in that situation, it's not really a mask mandate. It becomes an issue of trespassing or harassment, and we would get involved in those situations as a matter of law."

The first sheriff to pen a letter opposing the new mask mandate was Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen, who took office at the beginning of 2021.

"I believe that as Americans, we have a right to choose," Bowen said in a previous interview. "This isn't a law, and it hasn't been voted on by the people."

Bowen's letter urged residents to "stand up" against the rules passed down amid the worst surge of COVID-19 infections in Eastern Oregon and across the state, owing largely to the delta variant and far surpassing previous infection rates, according to Oregon Health Authority data.

### Chorus against masking up grows

Bowen told The Observer on Sept. 1, that when the mask mandate arrived in Union County, he had felt a personal responsibility to respond against it — for himself and for the majority of Union County residents — so he penned the letter addressing the governor and sent it via registered mail to her office.

"We haven't really had a voice in this. It's not really our fight, if you will. And then when it became the homefront of our children, and my own child in school having to wear masks, it put that fight right in my living room," Bowen said. "I wanted to stand up and be a voice and let folks know that I supported the majority of Union County residents — the strong majority of Union County residents — that it should be an individual's choice and we shouldn't be masking our children."

Soon after, nearly a dozen sheriffs across the state — including those in Douglas, Lake, Malheur, Columbia and Tillamook counties — joined in a cacophony of open letters stating their offices would not enforce mask mandates even though no government agency asked them to do so.

"I've not had any contacts with the governor's office asking us to do anything. We've not had any requests or demands," Matlack said.

Matlack emphasized he is asking his officers to mask up and sanitize while at work and properly adhere to guidelines set by the OHA. Across the nation, COVID-19 was the cause of more than half of all officer line-of-duty related deaths in 2020, according to a study by National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund.

"It's actually a civil issue and we play no role in enforcing civil penalties," Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley said. That's an OHA rule, so OSHA has the ability to enforce the OHA mask rule. It's not our role."

McKinley further said the belief that sheriffs' offices would be responsible for enforcement of mask mandates is a "misnomer."

"What's great about this country is everybody gets a chance to make a choice, so make your choice," he said. "If you're sick, stay home. Don't make others be exposed. If you're sick just stay home until you're better. It's a health issue, treat it as such."



Bowen



Matlack

## Activities:

Continued from Page A1

While children can get ill from COVID-19, they rarely get severely sick, Gill said. But they can bring the infections home with them and spread it to at-risk people such as the elderly and immunocompromised.

Brown confirmed her order for mandatory vaccinations, saying that staff who are not fully vaccinated cannot have contact with students or other school employees.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's epidemiologist, said the Oregon Health Authority was looking into an 8.8% increase in the number of new COVID-19 infections in Marion County.

The uptick comes as the Oregon State Fair in Salem has just concluded. Brown had ordered that crowded outdoor events have mandatory masking rules, but television reports from the fair showed the majority of those inside were not wearing masks.

The rules are also in place for the Pendleton Round-Up, which begins Saturday, Sept. 11 in Umatilla County. Brown said she hope fair organizers would follow state rules and venues that violated the rule could face state sanctions.

She said she hoped attendees

will wear masks and be aware of social distancing and other ways to prevent getting or spreading the virus.

"Let 'er Buck," Brown said, using the Round-Up's signature saying.

Brown has attended the Round-Up in prior years and even rode a horse in the parade. She did not go to the state fair and will not be in Pendleton next week out of concern for "public spread" of the virus.

### Top of the spike

Major public health forecasts indicated for the first time last week that the top of the spike may have been reached.

The growth in infections may have peaked as early as Aug. 25 in Oregon, according to the widely followed COVID-19 monitoring and forecasting of The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

The Oregon Health & Science University forecast last week that hospitalizations for COVID-19 was expected to peak at an estimated 1,208 patients on Sept. 6. The latest OHA report, from Sept. 7, showed 1,140 COVID-19 patients in hospitals, down from 1,172 reported on Sept. 3.

"We're in a dire state, but I am seeing some signs that this is going to level out in the next week," said Dr. Peter Graven, the

lead forecaster, in a statement accompanying the Sept. 2 report.

The OHSU model showed that with current mask usage and other safeguards, cases would drop back to pre-surge levels of under 200 hospitalizations by the last two weeks in October.

If the trendline continued, the number of hospitalizations statewide could be under a dozen by mid-December.

The next OHSU forecast is due Sept. 9.

### Trending down

The World Health Organization said last week that the delta variant wave worldwide had started to fall, with the United States somewhat behind Europe and other regions.

The trends won't be known for sure until additional reports over the next week show the drop continuing.

Sidelinger said an increase in voluntary mask-wearing and other efforts to slow transmission of COVID-19 could shorten the timeline for getting to a lower level.

On the flip side, if people drop safeguards too early, it could push the recovery into November and closer to impacting the winter holidays.

The COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, with the possibility of new variants as long as large

numbers of people worldwide remain unvaccinated.

Once it infects someone, the virus can mutate within its host, and release a variant of the original infection.

"This is a crisis that is largely being driven by people who have not yet been vaccinated," said Sidelinger.

As of Sept. 7, there have been 221.5 million cases and over 4.58 million deaths worldwide, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. Just over 5.37 million people worldwide are expected to die of COVID-19 by Dec. 1, according to a the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

The United States last week passed 40 million reported cases and deaths are at 649,271, according to Johns Hopkins. IHMA projects 751,417 deaths by Dec. 1.

Johns Hopkins said its survey of state and local health agencies showed that 44,558 vaccine doses were administered nationwide Monday. More than 176 million people are fully vaccinated, about 51% of the U.S. population.

The New York Times reported Sept. 7 that the current spike has peaked in the United States. The average daily new cases of 131,135 is down 12% from from two weeks ago. The analysis showed that Oregon had dropped 33% over the same period.

## Redistricting:

Continued from Page A1

"It's sort of like a balloon," he said. "If you compress one part of it, it pops out some place else."

Originally elected to House District 59 in 2000, Smith is now participating in his third redistricting cycle. From his home in Heppner, Smith not only has represented constituents in Umatilla and Morrow counties, but also Gilliam, Sherman, Grant, Union, Wallowa, Baker, Crook and Jefferson counties, depending on which district he was drawn into.

Smith warned that redistricting was among the most political topics in Salem and whatever was on the table now likely was to change before it was done.

"What the public is seeing today is not what it's going to see tomorrow," he said.

### Current boundaries

Since 2011, Pendleton and Hermiston have been in different Oregon House districts.

District 57 covers the northwest portion of the county, including Hermiston, Umatilla and Stanfield, extending far enough west to cover Milton-Freewater. The rest of District 57 is based west of Umatilla

County, encompassing Morrow, Gilliam and Sherman counties plus a small, sparsely populated sliver of Wasco County east of The Dalles. District 58 covers the rest of Umatilla County, including Pendleton, Echo and Athena before extending east, covering the entirety of Union and Wallowa counties.

Prior to the 2011 round of redistricting, District 58 was a much more compact district comprised of Pendleton and Hermiston and some of the surrounding area. District 57 formed a u-shape around it, starting in Morrow County, dipping below Pendleton and Hermiston to cover southern Umatilla County before moving north again to include Milton-Freewater and east to cover Union and Wallowa Counties.

Senate District 29 is a combination of House districts 57 and 58, meaning the senate seat is roughly within the footprint of Northeastern Oregon.

### Plan A

Under House Plan A, a slight shift in the Umatilla County boundary would change some communities' representation.

The plan splits the districts along Highway 11, from Pendleton to Milton-Freewater. That means, Athena, Helix and Adams would move from District 58 to District

57. The boundary moves east before hitting the Oregon-Washington border, moving Milton-Freewater from 57 to 58. The rest of the communities in Umatilla County would remain their districts.

The rest of District 58 would be confined to Union and Wallowa counties, but District 57 would see its geographic footprint expand substantially under the plan. The new District 57 would gain Wheeler and Grant counties in addition to a larger portion of Wasco County, although the cities it covers would remain the same.

Senate District 19 still would combine districts 57 and 59, meaning it, too, will gain Grant and Wheeler counties. Sen. Bill Hansell said Senate Plan A was negotiated by both sides of the aisle in the Senate, and while he's confident it would pass the Senate, he's less sure about its prospects in the House or the governor's desk.

Hansell said the lines also may change after receiving public testimony. He noted he recently learned that Grant and Harney counties often share resources and services, and may want to share legislative districts.

### Plan B

House Plan B would lead to less changes in Umatilla County, but more dramatic changes would be

planned elsewhere.

House District 58 would be renamed District 59, but besides adding Milton-Freewater from District 57, it would represent the same communities it did under the current map. Like Plan A, District 57 would add Wheeler County. But instead of also adding Grant County, the district would expand further west to take in the eastern portion of The Dalles.

Senate Plan B is far more radical, splitting Umatilla County into two different senate districts. The Senate split would follow the same lines as the House, but instead of aligning eastern Umatilla County with the rest of Northeastern Oregon, the area would join a sprawling Senate District 20 that contains Union, Wallowa, Baker, Grant, Malheur and Lake counties. Western Umatilla County and Morrow County still would be in District 29, but they would be joined by Gilliam, Sherman, Wheeler and Jefferson counties, the entirety of Wasco County, plus a section of Hood River County that includes the city of Hood River and a northern slice of Deschutes County that includes Sisters.

Hansell said the House GOP proposed Senate Plan B and would lead to him being drawn into the same district as Vale Republican

Lynn Findley in the Senate. If this map were to pass, Hansell said he would be allowed to serve out the rest of his term through 2024 but would have to move if he wanted to run for reelection to District 29.

### Plan C

House Plan C would mostly maintain the status quo on the Umatilla County split with the exception of Milton-Freewater. A small part of the north side of the city would stay in District 57 while the rest would be moved to District 58.

The rest of District 58 would look the same as it does now while District 57 would expand like it does in the other plans. Under Plan C, District 57 would gain Wheeler County and most of Wasco County except the northwest corner where The Dalles and Mosier are located. The District would also stretch into Jefferson County and very small sections of Clackamas and Marion counties so that the district encompasses the Warm Springs Reservation.

Senate District 29 would remain intact in Senate Plan C and would follow District 57's expansion west, adding Wheeler County, a larger section of Wasco County and the entirety of the Warm Springs Reservation.