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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Ann Marie Hardin, a hospital chaplain, poses for a portrait Friday, Oct. 8, 2021, in the chapel at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton.

Most local teachers vaccinated ahead of deadline

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — An overwhelming majority of Pendleton School District staff will be vaccinated against COVID-19 by the state's Oct. 18 deadline. But a contingent of district employees are using religious exemptions to avoid getting the shot while keeping their jobs.

At a Tuesday, Oct. 5 school board meeting, Superintendent Chris Fritsch shared a report that showed nearly 9 out of 10 education workers were vaccinated against the virus.

Collectively, 87.5% of district employees are vaccinated or will be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18. There isn't much separation in vaccination rates between types of employees, either: certified staff (teachers, counselors and administrators) were vaccinated at an 89.7% rate while classified staff (secretaries, assistants, custodians, maintenance and district office staff) had a 84.5% rate.

In an interview after the meeting, Fritsch said the vaccination rate is higher than expected.

"We're in a better position than a lot of other districts," he said.

Although more than 10% of district staff remained unvaccinated, most won't be forced out of work following the deadline. Thirty two staff — 15 certified and 17 classified — secured religious exemptions to the vaccine. Another five were granted medical exemptions, although three are only temporary.

The exemption process is spelled out in agreements between the district and its unions for teachers and classified staff. Religious exemptions require an employee to write and sign a statement "explaining why the employee is requesting a religious exception, the religious principle(s) that guide the employees objections to the vaccination, and the religious basis that prohibits the COVID-19 vaccination."

Medical exemptions require a note from a medical provider explaining the health condition that prevents the employee from getting the vaccine. Fritsch said employees with temporary medical exemptions will be given 45 days to get the vaccine once their exemption ends to account for the waiting period between shots for two dose vaccines.

32 staff obtained religious waivers to the shots, five have medical exemptions

A PLACE TO LAY Hospital chaplain provides respite for health care workers amid pandemic

SADNESS

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The patient had been fighting in the intensive care unit for weeks, and the nurse had grown attached.

He was younger than most COVID-19 patients admitted to CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton. It was August, and the delta variant was raging through Oregon, filling hospitals with patients and exhausting health care workers.

A record number of Umatilla County residents who contracted the virus died that month. He was one of them.

Ann Marie Hardin, a hospital chaplain, was called in to help with the next steps, telling the family and the funeral home. She turned a corner and saw the nurse, who burst into tears and fell into Hardin's arms.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A list of precautions adorn the door of a COVID-19 patient Aug. 19, 2021, in the critical care unit at St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton.

"She felt that it was such a waste," Hardin said. "The patient was young. Had the patient been vaccinated, there potentially could have been a different outcome. And that was really hard to process for her. She felt that it

shouldn't have had to happen. He shouldn't have had to die. And she looked to me as a safe place to lay some of that sadness."

Hardin did what she has done throughout the pandemic — she listened. The nurse vented to

Hardin about things she knew few would understand but her.

"We had a conversation about how hard this was for her because she had gotten attached to the patient," said Hardin. "And I was reminded that I do this job to try to help our nurses through these hard moments."

As one of St. Anthony's three chaplains, Hardin's job is to walk around the hospital and talk to health care workers, helping them find solace and make sense of what they witness. It's a job several health care workers say has become especially critical as they endure the pandemic's toll.

"I do think chaplains are some of the only people that nurses can talk to who do understand on at least a level what they're dealing with and what they're going through," Hardin said. "Because we're there, and we see it."

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Drop-in centers ready to help people in need

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Three drop-in peer centers opened Wednesday, Oct. 6, cutting ribbons on a new resource to help people suffering addictions.

The Oregon Washington Health Network COPEs — Community Outreach Prevention Engagement Services — clinics in Hermiston, Pendleton and Milton-Freewater offer support and guidance from peers, who are able to share their stories and direct people to assistance, whether that help is for addiction recovery or not. Some people may want assistance in making their addictions less problematic, and other people will want aid for dealing with family members who are addicts.

"We want everyone who comes here to feel loved," said Kathleen Pollard, one of the Hermiston center's peer mentors.

Bill Bernard, a certified recovery mentor at Pendleton's COPEs Clinic, said he is grateful for the opportunity to help others confront their addictions.

Bernard, who has been clean for the last seven and a half years, said he remembers feeling the way his clients do and feeling hopeless.

"I'm going to give you a hand up and out of that gutter," he said.

Bernard recalled cold nights living on the streets of Eugene, bathing in the Willamette River and trips in and out of the detox center as he experienced homelessness and drug addiction.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Bill Bernard, a certified recovery mentor and certified gambling recovery mentor, walks through the newly opened COPEs Clinic on Friday, Oct. 8, 2021, in Pendleton. The Oregon Washington Health Network operates the clinic, which serves to provide recovery assistance and mentorship to those experiencing addiction, whether that assistance is for recovery or not.

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