



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Children and their parents sit in a post vaccination observation area Saturday, Nov. 13, 2021, during a youth COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center in Mission.

Vaccines:

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“Some things aren’t the same,” she said.

That’s why she was thrilled that her 8-year-old daughter decided on the morning of the clinic that she wanted to get the vaccine. She didn’t want Samarah to experience what she had.

“It’s reassuring,” she said. “I feel more secure with her going to school ... I’m just so proud of her.”

One family’s choice

Since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration authorized the vaccine’s emergency use among children on Oct. 29, Luka badgered her parents about when she could go get her shot.

She wanted to go back to school, away from her inconsistent Wi-Fi and lost Zoom calls. She wanted to

see family she hadn’t seen in months — and the Portland Trail Blazers. She wanted to travel again and follow through on her plans to live with her friends in a California mansion.

“IF WE WANT TO GET THROUGH THIS, EVERYONE HAS TO DO THEIR PART.”

— Aaron Worden, dad

The family followed health care workers down a hallway. Streamers with puppies on them hung from the ceiling, and balloon mats dotted the floors.

Luka sat down in front of registered nurse Adam White. She rolled up the

sleeve of her Mickey Mouse T-shirt. She told White she wasn’t nervous. “She’s a pro,” Worden said.

Luka’s dad, Aaron Worden, filmed with his smartphone. As White took Luka’s arm and administered the dose, she hardly flinched. He put a Scooby Doo bandage on her arm, and she high-fived her mother.

“It’s nice to touch a shoulder and say now, you will be more likely to survive,” White said after the family had left.

Luka walked to the waiting room, where the Disney film “Moana” played from multiple large screens. She drank from a juice box called and said she felt good. Her parents said it would be a few days before they exhaled relief.

“At least we’re trying,” Worden said. “If we want to get through this, everyone has to do their part.”

Bill:

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Oregon Department of Transportation as to how it will divvy up its \$1.2 billion, but if it’s similar to the state gas tax, half would stay with the department, 30% would be split among the counties and the final 20% would be shared between cities.

Mark Morgan, the assistant city manager of Hermiston, said he was frustrated that attention quickly turned to Portland-area projects, including the Interstate 5 widening in the Rose Quarter and a new Columbia River crossing shortly after Congress passed the infrastructure bill.

Morgan said cities such as Hermiston and Pendleton are in a “federal grant donut hole” — too big to qualify for infrastructure loans under the U.S. Department of Agriculture but too small to compete with large cities applying for high-dollar grants.

And while ODOT’s work with surface roads makes it a natural fit to distribute federal funds for road work, Morgan said he didn’t know how funds would be distributed for other key infrastructure pieces, such as underground utilities.

“There’s no ODOT equivalent for drinking water,” he said.

Morgan said Hermiston has a number of infrastructure projects it could fund with additional federal money, including the Gettman Road/Railway Alternative Transportation Enhancement, or GRATE project, which aims to connect Highway 395 and Highway 207 by replacing a bridge, building a new road, widening existing road and enhancing a railroad crossing. The total cost of the project is roughly \$8.6 million, but it’s broken out into four phases so the city doesn’t need to work on it all at once.

In a newsletter to public officials, Umatilla County Commissioner George

Murdock also sounded a note of caution.

While mentioning Umatilla County’s public works director was optimistic the infrastructure bill could help locally with bridges and surface transportation, Murdock was concerned some of the bill’s allocations were too large for a county the size of Umatilla and smaller communities might have trouble matching grant programs created through the bill.

And with the bill covering other types of infrastructure, including public transportation, broadband internet and wildfire management, Murdock said the county would need to wait to see how the bill would apply locally.

“In short, we have learned it will be good for Umatilla County,” Murdock wrote, “but comparing over half a billion dollars in new investments with what we are likely to see in Oregon and Umatilla County is very likely an illusion.”

Paying for the test

A grant through the federal Environmental Protection Agency is paying for the analysis, and the DEQ’s laboratory will analyze the drinking water samples for 25 PFAS compounds, at no cost to local cities.

If tested, most people in the U.S. would be found to have PFAS in their blood, according to the Oregon Health Authority. However, testing for PFAS exposure is expensive, and not likely to be covered by insurance.

According to OHA, long-term exposure to PFAS chemicals can affect growth, learning and behavior of infants and children, interfere with the body’s hormones, increase cholesterol levels, affect the immune system and increase the risk of cancer.

The DEQ has not yet set a date for the completion of the testing in the 150 Oregon locations. Results from testing can take upward of a month between collection and a finished analysis, according to Esteve.

“This is the pilot. These first 20 we want to see how that goes,” Esteve said. “And then based on how that worked and what results we get, that will inform the timetable going forward.”

PFAS:

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Park in La Grande. Results from the first few collection sites should be finished and analyzed by the end of November. Of the 150 sites across the state, only 20 have been sampled so far, according to Esteve.

“Samples from the first 20 public water systems have been collected. We made a list of the 150 we are going to sample eventually, over time, but we started with 20 — and frankly we started with those because they were kind of near our lab, which is in Hillsboro,” Esteve said. “So we can get out there quickly and get some results a little bit more quickly. Travel is still a little bit on the iffy side, given the delta variant.”

Testing then and now

This is not the first time Oregon has tested its water systems for the presence of the chemicals. Between 2013 and 2015, a study from the Oregon Health Authority tested all major public drinking water systems in Oregon cities with more than 10,000 residents and did not detect harmful amounts of the PFAS chemicals included in the testing. So far, Oregonians do not seem to be exposed to these chemicals in harmful

PFAS TESTING SITES

For a complete list of PFAS testing sites in Oregon, visit bit.ly/3ngVJKK.

amounts through their water, according to the OHA.

According to the OHA, some plants, such as grasses, can absorb contamination when they are fertilized with PFAS-contaminated material from wastewater treatment plants. This has resulted in cows producing contaminated milk in some dairy farms in the U.S. There also is evidence that when surface water is contaminated, certain PFAS compounds can accumulate in fish.

In the 2013-15 study, 65 sites were tested for six PFAS chemicals. The Oregon DEQ and the Oregon Health Authority now are testing 150 sites for up to 25 PFAS chemicals. The partnership between the DEQ and OHA seeks to crack down on PFAS contamination that could end up in drinking water, a primary concern to both agencies.

“The most likely pathway into the human body is through drinking water, and that’s why we’re doing this proactively — taking a look and seeing what’s in the water,” Esteve said.

Warming:

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The station has 33 volunteers, but it needs more than 100, Messenger said. Having more than 100 volunteers will give the board a sufficient pool of help.

The Hermiston Warming Station started in 2011, Messenger said, and its start was in local churches. Each week, during those early days, a different local church would act as the town’s warming station, he said. Then, as now, people without a permanent place to reside would come to the station for shelter, food and opportunities to clean themselves. The station has operated at the Highway 395 location since 2017.

A common problem

Other programs like the Hermiston Warming Station are facing shortages of volunteers, according to Paula Hall, CEO of Community Action Program of East Central Oregon.

Her organization operates the Promise Inn, a former motel converted into a transitional housing facility. Unlike a warming station, which is seasonal and open only when temperatures drop, the Promise Inn, 205 S.E. Dorion Ave., Pendleton, is open throughout the year.

The facility, which opened April 1, does not rely on volunteers, Hall said. Thanks to grant funding, the Promise Inn has paid staff, which includes a case manager, a street outreach worker and an onsite worker.

“Everyone who relies on volunteers, whether it is food banking or homeless services, are really struggling,” she said. “Primarily the volunteer pool are those who have retired and have more time to give to their community. Those are usually people who are older and more susceptible to COVID-19. And there goes your workforce.”

She said CAPECO “could not build a year-round shelter system on a volunteer base.”

The Pendleton Warming Station faces the same problem as its Hermiston counterpart. Dwight Johnson, executive director of Neighbor 2 Neighbor, the nonprofit that operates the station, said it will not open this year. Instead, the Pendleton Warming Station will offer motel vouchers to people in need as the weather grows colder.

Johnson cited COVID-19 concerns and volunteer shortage for not opening the congregate shelter.

He said many of his volunteers are older people who are not volunteering now because of the pandemic. Right now, he has 100 volunteers, 20-25 active. Pre-pandemic, he had 40-45 active volunteers, which still made operation “challenging.”

A volunteer’s perspective

Messenger said, when he started volunteering, he was



Antonio Sierra/East Oregonian

Bob Beltran checks into the Promise Inn, Pendleton, on its first night of operation on April 1, 2021. A grant funds the operations at the transitional housing facility, including paying for staff. Local volunteer organizations that provide warming stations are struggling this November to find enough volunteers to open on time.

looking for a way to help his community.

“I saw it on Facebook, where they needed volunteers, and I had time, so I tried it out and actually really enjoyed it,” he said.

His favorite thing about his work is listening to the stories of the station’s guests. Through their stories, the guests have given him new perspective on life, he said. Where some people may see them as dangerous, Messenger expressed he has come to learn otherwise. He said he has gained empathy and understanding, as he has discovered that people are more or less the same, homeless or otherwise.

He said it is common for volunteers to visit with guests, as also they distribute toiletries, food and other resources. Volunteers may also launder clothes.

A guest’s experience

Messenger explained the Hermiston Warming Station opens to guests at 7:30 p.m. Guests have to ring the doorbell, and a volunteer lets them in. From there, guests fill out paperwork, if it is their first visit, and they listen to a reading of the house rules, he said.

They pick their bedding, set up their bed and store their possessions in a tote, he said. Guests then may use the bathroom and laundry machines to clean, and they can get something to eat from the kitchen, he said.

There is room in the station for sleeping — one men’s room, one women’s room and a third room for a family or overflow. The men’s room can fit eight men and the women’s room can fit four, Messenger said and the intake area has space for further overflow, if needed. The maximum occupancy is 24, but it would be uncomfortable for more than 18 guests to spend the night, Messenger said.

Messenger said the station on a typical night serves 11 guests. He said he remembers one time in which the station was too crowded for a guest. Two years ago, he said, one person had to be turned away.

False perceptions play a role

The Hermiston Warming Station is experiencing not only a shortage of volunteers but of funds. Grants and donations cover the

station’s expenses. Donations, though, are low, he said, but he said he was not sure the reason.

He does have reasons for the drop in the number of volunteers, he said. He said he thinks COVID-19 is one cause.

Not that it has ever been easy to attract volunteers, he said. He admitted it is not very glamorous work, and it might seem dangerous to outsiders.

“People have false perceptions of it,” he said.

Policies, such as having multiple volunteers present during open hours, help keep volunteers safe, according to Messenger. Also, there are cameras set up throughout the house.

“No harm has ever come to anyone who has volunteered here,” Messenger said. The worst thing he said he could recall were arguments, he added.

Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said “there have been no significant issues” at the station, though his department does receive calls and responds “from time to time.”

In 2020, police were called 10 times to the warming station, according to a report from Edmiston, which cited reasons, such as vandalism, trespassing and welfare checks, for the calls.

In an email to EO Media Group, the chief offered something for people to consider. He stated that, based on the increase in aggression he has seen toward police, he “would imagine the warming station staff is also interacting with some of these same people and though our officers receive extensive training in hand-to-hand combat and how to avoid contaminated scenes, things happen.”

Messenger also said people might also be worried about COVID-19 infection, but he added he was not aware of any outbreaks at the station. He said there was one “scare,” a recent guest who said he was COVID-19 positive but was not.

He said the station is strict about masks. Volunteers and guests must use masks when not sleeping or eating, he said. Also, the station makes frequent use of sanitizer and cleaning products, he said, and an outside cleaning service has been brought in to sanitize.

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