

# Protest:

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On Aug. 19, Brown issued an executive order requiring public employees, such as educators, medical professionals and emergency services, to have completed doses of the vaccine by Oct. 18 or face the consequences, which could include fines or termination of employment. Employers, such as schools and hospitals, also could face fines.

The order does allow for religious or medical exemptions, although it does not explain the details on those or how they will be determined valid.

## Action planned

But those opposing the mandate are not sitting idly by, Miller said.

"We are here to let you know our stand: We will not tolerate the threats and coercion from Gov. Brown into medical treatment," she read from a prepared statement. "It strikes me to the core as a medical professional. We have heard our leadership in Oregon say they are counting on health care workers 'bluffing.' ... Let there be no question: No one is bluffing. A poll in our coalition resulted in 83% of respondents (said they) will not get the vaccine despite the mandate; 13% have already received the vaccines and stand against the mandate. We are educated and intelligent people in these professions. We have either had COVID, had the vaccine or been offered the vaccine. This is not about a vaccine at this point. Our group and most of the members of the health care and law enforcement professions stand with the Constitution of the United States supporting bodily autonomy, freedom, the right to pursuit of happi-

ness and liberty for all."

Miller said the coalition also is seeking advice and guidance from others planning legal action to halt the mandate.

## Mandate's consequences

"The repercussions of these vaccine mandates will be severe," Miller said. "Fire departments and ambulance services comprised of family-like workers will be nonexistent, leaving no emergency response. Our hospital won't have staff to care for patients and will struggle to stay open. And, if that's not enough, the crippling will extend much further than just the health care system. Teachers who haven't already retired early or quit will leave their profession. Public schools will shut down. State workers not given options for exemption will leave our state aching for forestry employees for prevention and protection of forest fires, social services, child-protective services, state police, department of transportation road services and many more core services that will be nonfunctioning due to the mandate.

"We are standing up here and now saying this is going to end."

Rogers was concerned that critical employees could lose their jobs.

"Just in talking to people, one of the fears is that we might have 25-50% of our hospital staff get fired; 25-35 to 40% of our teachers getting fired," he said.

Commissioner Todd Nash agreed and said it goes beyond the workers one thinks of at the forefront.

"It goes on and on. I got a call from one of the brand inspector supervisors," said Nash, who is a cattle rancher. "There are 16 brand inspectors in the state of Oregon and if this goes through the way it



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

**From left, Wallowa County Commissioners John Hillock, Susan Roberts and Todd Nash listen to more than 150 county residents Wednesday, Sept. 1, 2021, protesting state mandates requiring coronavirus vaccines. The grassroots gathering asked the commissioners to support them. The commissioners agreed to do so, but said they were limited in what they could do.**

looks right now, they'll have four. We don't know how we'd conduct commerce with livestock. There's a whole litany of things. It's very concerning how this thing all shakes out."

## Commissioners' help sought

"We don't want this for our community. We want to work with you to help put an end to this. We recognize that your power is limited, but on Aug. 26, the governor stated that counties across the state are vying for local control, but not one county has come forward and offered a plan on how to control the spread (of coronavirus.) We view this as a huge opportunity and we are seeking an open format to dialogue and put together a plan to present to the governor," Miller said. "I know this is not the end of mandates from Gov. Brown. Many studies done show masks, frequent testing, lockdowns don't work and we may be looking at vaccine failure with the new variants. So let's

not double-down on failed measures."

Miller asked the commissioners about setting up a meeting to build a plan to take to the governor.

"Actually, I was on that call before the governor came out with that statement," Nash said, "and I said, 'Our plan may look different than what you surmise.' So there's a number of our businesses that have offered curbside service, they've offered home delivery, there are residents who've went to deliver food or offer vaccines at people's homes. So our community did work together to try to provide for those who are vulnerable and those who felt threatened, and so we did have a plan."

He said other commissioners have weighed in.

"Commissioner (Susan) Roberts was mentioned — as she often is — she talks to the governor more than I do," Nash said. "Our vaccination rate for frontier Oregon is higher than most — if not the highest — of

any frontier county. The things that we provided, she acknowledged, but didn't accept that as a plan, either."

As Roberts told the crowd outside the courthouse after the meeting, she's often in communication with the governor.

"I've known the governor for 40 years and we've never agreed on anything, but at least I can talk to her," Roberts said, adding that she often takes a hard stand with Brown. "Someday, you come up to the third floor (of the courthouse) when I'm talking to the governor and you'll see."

Nash and the others weren't sure of anything constructive they can do now.

"For us to go back to her now and for her to just say 'No,' it does a couple of things," he said. "We could throw a plan out there — and I think all three of us would be amenable to looking at what you might have for an idea of a plan, but if she chooses to reject and she has summarily rejected things that counties have thrown at her, it almost becomes empowering that she has the power and local control won't get the power. Because we've been trying to get that from the very first."

Commissioner John Hillock agreed.

"I'm with Todd," he said. "We read the fine print after (the governor) spoke and one thing that comes up in the fine print that some people don't see is that our plan has to be in excess of her plan. It's like, 'I'll do my own plan and we won't make the kids wear masks.' Well, that doesn't work because that's not in excess of her plan. We can send her all the plans we want, but if we say we don't want to vaccinate or whatever, she's not going to accept them because they're

not in excess of her plan."

## Crowd frustrated

Although the commissioners weren't sure of what they could do to fight the governor's mandate, they agreed that protests such as happened Sept. 1 spoke volumes — but they said such protests need to be larger and more widespread.

Outside, Rogers agreed and told the crowd they need to bring in more people to make more voices heard. He also suggested writing to lawmakers and sending letters to the editor of newspapers.

"Actions speak louder than words," he said.

But that wasn't enough for some.

Joseph businessman Gary Bethscheider was one of the most vocal.

"Quit being a bunch of sheep. Quit being sheep! Let's go to the sheriff's office and we'll stand over there," he hollered. "Our sheriff needs to say, 'Enough.' We have elected him and he needs to say 'Enough's enough.'"

After someone complained about schools closing because of coronavirus, Bethscheider was eager to take the protest beyond vaccines.

"Send your kids to school every day without a mask. What are they going to do about it?" he said.

Roberts again emphasized that as a board, the commissioners can't do a whole lot beyond the public employees they supervise — not teachers, hospital staff or even law enforcement, and certainly not other governmental entities.

"As a board of commissioners, we don't have control of anything," she said, but urged more such gatherings as happened Sept. 1. "This is where the people (say we) have had enough."

# Workers:

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Just ask Robin Clement, co-owner of Monkless Belgian Ales in Bend. Clement and her husband opened their pub just four months before the pandemic shut it down to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Fast forward to July when tourism season in Central Oregon hits a high note and the state is reopening as COVID-19 cases wane, the Clements are scrambling to get enough workers to keep the brew pub open six days a week.

In an interview with an out-of-town worker recently seeking a lead prep cook position, Clement said she made an offer on the spot to the worker. The applicant dined with his family for dinner that night.

But the next day, he told Clement he took another position. The job he took offered slightly more money and a leadership role, something the small pub couldn't offer, Clement she said.

"It was really disappointing, but par for the course. He was one of the few interviews that I set up who actually showed," Clement said. "2020 was a cake walk compared to 2021.

"Customers have little grace. Their patience is thin. It's been hard dealing with

expectations."

## 'Perfect storm'

Only 32,500 eligible workers statewide are sitting out the labor market waiting for the pandemic to lift, who may have health concerns or child care issues, said Gail Krumenauer, Oregon Employment Department economist. And another 12,000 workers statewide, who had been in the leisure and hospitality industry, now are working in the transportation/warehousing and delivery sector because of higher wages and benefits, Krumenauer said. The average wage for leisure and hospitality in Oregon is about \$14 an hour but in transportation/warehousing it's \$18 to \$20 an hour.

"That's a tough spot to be in. The hiring is 1 1/2 times greater than we've ever seen," Krumenauer said. "This spring we had 98,000 job vacancies. That's a lot of what is fueling the worker shortage.

"That's a perfect storm: a lot of things happening all at once and it makes it hard for employers. Everyone's hiring."

Layer these events on top of one another and mix in pent-up demand for buying and traveling and the demand on goods and services increases, which in turn increases demand on the need for more workers, Krumenauer said.

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"Expanded benefits helped families in Central Oregon and nationwide keep food on the table and a roof over their heads when workers lost their jobs through no fault of their own during this public health pandemic," U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, said in an email. "Research has repeatedly debunked the baloney that benefits discouraged work.

"What's clear in my conversations with Oregonians all over our state is that the lack of child care, housing costs, the unique challenges of service industry work and other factors are what's really keeping many people from returning to the workplace."

The unemployment rate in July was 5.6% in Deschutes County, lower than the double-digit rates at the height of pandemic-related closures, but still above February 2020 when it was 3.3%, according to the Oregon Employment Department monthly unemployment figures. Crook and Jefferson counties too have seen their unemployment levels return to near normal levels in the months following the business closures imposed to slow the spread of the virus.

Crook County's unemployment rate was 7% in July, compared to 4.4% in February 2020. And Jefferson County's unemployment rate was 6.5% in July, com-

pared to 4.1% in February 2020.

In Eastern Oregon, Baker County's unemployment rate was 5.4% in July 2021, compared to 8.7% the prior July. Union County's unemployment rate was 5.8% in July 2021, down from 9.4% the prior July. Wallowa County's unemployment rate was 5.4% in July, compared to 8.3% and Umatilla County was 5.5% in July 2021, down from 7.3% in July 2020.

Statewide the unemployment rate was 5.2% in July, just slightly below the national unemployment rate of 5.4%.

"There's no doubt that (the federal boost of the unemployment insurance) is constraining the supply of labor," said Damon Runberg, Oregon Employment Department regional economist. "But I don't think it is to a significant degree.

"The labor market will likely ease some as we move into the fall, but that will be more a reflection of a reduction in job vacancies rather than a massive influx of workers who lost their federal unemployment insurance benefits."

Child care could potentially get worse if the Bend Park & Recreation District isn't able to hire 20 more workers for its after-school programs. It takes about 90 employees working part-time hours to run the 14 programs

in elementary schools, said Julie Brown, district community relations manager.

The district has posted hiring signs everywhere, even on the vehicles, posted ads on social media, job fairs with on-the-spot hiring, and even raised the hourly pay, she said.

"We've worked all summer long struggling to recruit the new employees needed," Brown said. "These things typically produce the results. This situation feels different."

In letters to parents, the park and recreation district asked for referrals from parents, she said. There are 1,000 children signed up for after school care when school starts Sept. 8 in Bend.

"We've never experienced this before," said Brown. "We offer training skills for those who want to do this job. Most of our workers are in their 20s, but we do have people working in these jobs in all ages."

## Most jobs returning

Nearly 18 months past the initial business restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus, Oregon has regained two out of every three jobs lost in the spring of 2020, Krumenauer said. Just in the leisure and hospitality sector alone, the state added 7,100 jobs in July, she said.

At Monkless, Clement said she hopes that after the federal unemployment sub-

sidy subsidies, she's hoping to take on a full complement of staff. She needs to fill about seven positions, and that's keeping her from opening her business seven days a week.

Clement said the pub has not been able to operate at full capacity since the shut down in March and that's because of staffing issues. And if summer hires leave or wait staff leave because they don't want to wear a mask, she might have to consider closing for lunch or limiting more service.

"It's challenging as an employer," Clement said. "The worries I had in 2020 were if we were going to make it because we were a new brew pub. This year we have an unprecedented number of customers and a lack of staff that continues to get worse."

Sparrow Bakery's owner Keatman said she thinks the stress of the pandemic is wearing thin on workers who have to face customers daily. With the average age of a service industry about 19 to 24, Keatman said, she sees anxiety at levels she's never seen before.

"Workers in this age group don't have a secure financial situation and they're trying to figure things out," Keatman said. "They're trying to figure things out. Being at work sucks."

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There were many standout performances over the weekend, but Jaxon Grover's effort may have topped them all. Grover rushed for 164 yards and three touchdowns, including the winning score in overtime of Joseph's 39-32 victory over Echo Friday. But he also stepped up on defense, snagging an interception and scooping up a fumble.

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