

National Guard members lend a much-needed hand

Several Eastern Oregon Hospitals say the extra staffing will help exhausted health care workers

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — National Guard members have arrived at many Eastern Oregon hospitals as the COVID-19 pandemic reaches its apex in recent cases caused by the virulent delta variant.

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center, Baker City; Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Enterprise; and Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande; each have citizen-soldiers on site to help, in addition to the Guard members already at Blue Mountain Hospital, John Day.

At least 20 Guard members were deployed to assist in operations at hospitals in nonclinical roles. The hospitals moved to fill in gaps with the National Guard soldiers, placing them in positions throughout the hospitals as ancillary support staff.

Staff at the overburdened health care centers more than welcomed the added support for roles such as front door screeners, which clinical staff often had filled.

"That helps us be able to deploy our clinical people back to clinical work," said Priscilla Lynn, president and chief nursing officer at Saint Alphonsus.

Freeing up resources for the health care staff improves efficiency during a time when worker shortages abound across nearly every industry, and when nurses and other clinical staff have been taxed by an unrelenting 18 months of fighting a pandemic.

"All of the entry level positions across our county — it's difficult to fill those positions, and we're experiencing that same thing,"

Lynn said. "We've had staff out, difficult to fill-in positions that are open for a really long time. So having the Guard here (means) the staff is getting a little reprieve. The staff is really grateful. We've had an exhausted crew."

Blue Mountain Hospital District in Grant County was one of the first places where the National Guard was activated after Gov. Kate Brown's emergency order set in motion a surge of nearly 1,500 citizen-soldiers in support of health care workers and hospitals.

The first 500 were deployed near the middle of August, while the remaining 1,000 were set to be deployed and activated in the following weeks.

Grande Ronde Hospital welcomed 10 National Guard members on Monday, Sept. 13, to help support operations, according to the hospital.

Many of the recently activated soldiers were La Grande locals, including National Guard Spc. Pamela Fredrick, a native of Micronesia, who recently earned her degree in communications at Eastern Oregon University.

"I'm always ready whenever we get called in," she said. "We were told beforehand that this might happen."

Fredrick, whose job title in the National Guard is culinary specialist, found herself at home in the kitchen at the hospital, working alongside hospital staff and fellow guardsman Spc. Jacob Jensen.

Upstairs in the surgical center, Spc. Renay Monohan, of La Grande, assisted with the environmental crew by sanitizing and

cleaning a procedure room.

In addition to the support from the National Guard, some hospitals have received a boost in clinical staff through programs, such as SERV-OR, that allocate nurses and clinicians across the country.

SERV-OR features a roster of medical workers — including physicians, nurses and emergency medical technicians — who signed up as volunteers to assist health care centers during the heightened infection rate of COVID-19 across the state.

"We have a hero in our midst," Lynn said. "We did get a nurse through the SERV-OR program who has been working some shifts and has a few shifts left in a volunteer staff. Super grateful for that amazing nurse. We also requested through the OHA processes for travel nurses. Nursing staff are expected. We have a couple starting (Sept. 14) and expect a few more to trickle in through the week."

Grande Ronde Hospital is expected to bolster its health care force through a traveling nurse program, according to Mardi Ford, director of communications and marketing at the hospital.

Wallowa Memorial Hospital welcomed two National Guard members on Sept. 13 who will serve as front door screeners, according to Brooke Pace, director of communications and public relations at the hospital. Additionally, the hospital is receiving support through two additional nurses staffed through a program called Favorite Healthcare Staffing, a traveling nurse program.



Alex Wittwer/La Grande Observer
Oregon National Guard Spc. Renay Monohan cleans a room Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021, at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande. Monohan, a La Grande local, works as a health care medic as her regular job with the U.S. Forest Service.

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