

**VOICE of the CHIEFTAIN**

## Issues remain after deadline pushed back

The news that more than half of Oregon's state employees will get an extra six weeks to get inoculated against COVID-19 was welcome, but the question of what happens after the deadline remains unanswered.

Gov. Kate Brown pushed back the earlier October deadline and set Nov. 30 as the final date state employees must be vaccinated. The decision affects more than 20,000 workers.

Yet many people — including many in the health care industry — have no intention of getting vaccinated for a variety of reasons, and that could mean the state will face a new crisis on top of an already spiraling COVID-19 surge.

That we've reached this point in what is a once-a-century pandemic is beyond troubling. It is sad.

Yet, here we are. If neither side budges — and so far, the governor hasn't indicated she plans to back down — then the small towns scattered across Eastern Oregon will encounter a new medical emergency because there will be fewer qualified people to attend to those with the virus and people injured or in need of serious care.

In a sense, the area's hospitals are caught in the middle — a not uncommon situation since the pandemic began — as they must comply with the state mandate but, at the same time, need qualified people to operate effectively.

Ultimately, much of the final consequence of this situation is out of the hands of residents of the region. We can sympathize with health care workers, or we can feel they should all follow the governor's mandate but, in the end, it will be an individual decision thousands of workers have to make.

So, the real question is what measures and fail-safes are elected leaders across the region proposing to overcome a sudden loss of thousands of qualified workers? What will be the state's role if the region faces a mass exodus of health care workers? Have local elected leaders reached out to state leaders about the issue? If so, what plan is in the works?

We can't afford to wait around and see who blinks first. We need actionable plans in case we lose a great number of workers.



## LETTERS to the EDITOR

### GOP is succeeding where bin Laden failed

While I appreciate the many compelling national and local stories about the impact of the 9/11 attacks, including those that appeared in the Chieftain, the somber truth of this anniversary has been largely left out of the coverage: Osama bin Laden won.

The attacks on 9/11 were merely the detonating charge that got us to blow up our own country and violate what remained of its nobler values — to embrace torture, end due process for certain groups, establish a surveillance state, mire ourselves in bloody and expensive Sisyphean efforts at regime change abroad, refuse to recognize and address the ongoing climate apocalypse and embrace ventilators over masks in the current pandemic.

Now, one of our major political parties is in thrall to an aspiring autocrat and working feverishly to cripple and nullify voting. What bin Laden could not achieve — the end of America as a free, prosperous and democratic nation — the GOP is pursuing with an untrammelled passion. It has been a grim trajectory from the flaming towers to our own self-immolation.

**Stephen Ducat Joseph**

### Analyzing vaccine 'pro' vs. 'con' letters

The Chieftain published a series of Opinion letters arguing the "pros" and "cons" of COVID preventative measures.

The "pro" camp presented objective, science-based facts showing vaccination and masking to be safe and effective against COVID hospitalizations and death, consistent with conclusions of infectious disease experts and our county's physicians.

The "con" perspective challenged the safety and effectiveness of these measures and questioned the ethics of vaccinating children. This opinion was not substantiated by credible scientific research or endorsed by public health authorities.

Vaccinated county residents (65%) obviously side with the "pro" science camp. They chose wisely since the unvaccinated account for the overwhelming majority of our local hospitalized COVID-sick patients.

The debate has now turned ideological. The "con" camp argues for personal choice to refuse vaccination and masking mandates. Implied is liberty to also infect others, overcrowd hospital beds and pass onto taxpayers costs to treat preventable illness. Our county's 12 COVID deaths and 602 diagnosed cases argues against the "con" camp libertarian position.

I'll weigh into the ideological debate as a clinician who took care of combat-wounded veterans for 31 years. Those veterans courageously stepped up to take a bullet in the name of patriotism, defined

as "devotion to and vigorous support of one's country."

Libertarians who won't brave a needle stick and inconvenience of a mask might consider walking in the footsteps of those who secured their liberty through sacrifice, while reflecting on JFK's imperative to "ask what you can do for your country."

**Miles McFall Joseph**

### Comparison between medical choice and drunk driving 'absurd'

There is a fundamental error with the assertion that "the right to infect" others is not a protected liberty.

A recent contributor astutely pointed out that drunk driving is prohibited because it poses a risk to other citizens and concluded that, in a similar way, refusing to wear a mask or vaccinate presents a threat to public health. While this argument may seem reasonable at first blush, it is based on the presupposition that an unmasked/unvaccinated person poses a real (as opposed to theoretical) risk to others.

Fortunately, an uninfected person poses zero risk of coronavirus transmission; only someone with an active COVID infection poses a risk of spreading the virus to others. Of note, an August report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed nearly three-quarters of new COVID cases arising from large gatherings in a Massachusetts town occurred in vaccinated people. The suggestion that unvaccinated people are a legitimate threat to public health is deeply concerning to anyone who values the rule of law.

Surprisingly, only 35 states have laws criminalizing HIV exposure (Oregon is not one of them). State laws relating to communicable diseases vary in strictness, but according to Harvard Law, "... in order to establish a cause of action for a negligent conduct, a plaintiff must establish that (1) the defendant owes him or her a duty; (2) there was a breach of that duty; (3) there is a causal connection between the defendant's conduct and the harm incurred to the plaintiff; and (4) damages to the plaintiff." Prosecutors may be able to charge assault and battery or criminal negligence, but only if the burden of proof is satisfied. As it turns out, the "right to infect others" may actually be protected if there is insufficient evidence.

An argument that equates a personal medical decision with running over pedestrians in a crosswalk is absurd and completely ignores the structure and function of the American justice system. We should not be accusing people of crimes just because we feel their actions threaten our current way of life. When we leave legal matters in the hands of the mob, we

end up lynching people based not on evidence of a crime committed, but on our own ignorance and bigotry.

The argument that unvaccinated people are selfishly (and criminally) putting others at risk makes an appeal to emotion, but it lacks legal and evidential support.

**Rebecca Patton Enterprise**

### Time to embrace vaccines and masks

This summer marks 50 years for me in Wallowa County. I came to spend a year — and I stayed. I stayed because the land is wonderful. I stayed because of people. In the 50 years countless tragedies — fires, accidents and diseases — have hit Wallowa County families. And again and again, neighbors, friends and strangers have stepped up to comfort and help get people and families through hard times. We haven't erased bad things, but we have dealt with them honestly and selflessly. We've not asked about religion or politics, wealth or which end of the county the afflicted are from. We just help.

And now we have a crisis. Over 600 of us have had or have the coronavirus and 12 have died as of Oct. 4, according to the Oregon Health Authority. We're getting 5-10 new cases each day, and our hospital is operating on the edge. Cases in Idaho, with one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country, are exploding. Umatilla and Union counties ditto. We cannot send serious COVID patients — or serious patients of any kind — to nearby hospitals.

There is fear that our hospital and assisted living center will lose staff with the vaccination mandate. The Soroptimists and Rotary are rounding up volunteers to work at assisted living.

Our friends, neighbors and relatives are in the hospital and nursing home right now. I am 78 and healthy — but I'm at risk. A good many of my friends and neighbors are at risk due to age, asthma, weak hearts or lungs, diabetes, etc.

I am asking all of you to put aside politics and religion, vitamins and health regimes and embrace vaccinations and masks. If "mandates" bother you, remember that you complied with the state to get your driver's license, to go to school until you were 16, and to go into the military when called.

Your neighbor's house is on fire and we're all the volunteer fire department. I am not asking you to change your political or religious affiliation, or to donate blood or a kidney (which many of you have already done). Just a shot in the arm — yes, sometimes painful for a day or two, but overwhelmingly effective — and a mask on the face (when you have time, I'll share my story of how a mask kept me safe from COVID).

**Rich Wandschneider Joseph**

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**SEND LETTERS TO:** [editor@wallowa.com](mailto:editor@wallowa.com), or via mail to Wallowa County Chieftain, 209 NW 1st St. Enterprise, OR 97828