

Facebook Live event keys in on COVID-19 in community

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

There are 17 active cases of COVID-19 in the Grand Ronde community as of Wednesday, Dec. 9, said Tribal Health Services Director Kelly Rowe during the Tribe's 14th Facebook Live event held since the coronavirus became a national public health concern in mid-March.

Rowe said that of the 39 positive cases reported on the Tribe's website, some of those afflicted with the coronavirus have recovered.

The Tribal government's website states that the Health & Wellness Center has conducted 1,311 tests with 39 positives for a 3 percent positivity rate as of Dec. 9.

"We know that this is happening in our community," Rowe said. "It's getting closer. It's more prevalent. So please, please adhere to the public health recommendations."

Rowe joined Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy and General Manager David Fullerton for the 35-minute Facebook Live event that attracted approximately 260 attendees. Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez moderated the event and tracked questions submitted by those tuning in.

Kennedy, who has a long and distinguished career in public health, reiterated that the best way to fight the virus and prevent its spread is the observe public health protocols, such as wearing a mask, social distancing, washing hands thoroughly and frequently, and avoiding large gatherings outside of work.

"Let's all help one another out and express our love and care for one another by practicing those ways of living," she said.

Rowe said that the Tribal Health



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~ General Manager David Fullerton

& Wellness Center, which is aggressively testing and contact tracing, currently can conduct 28 COVID-19 tests daily using its sole rapid testing analyzer. Despite repeated overtures to state and federal partners, the Tribal clinic has not been able to obtain additional analyzers to expand its testing capacity.

As a backup, Rowe said, the clinic can send tests to the state lab, but the four- to five-day turnaround for results does not provide optimal information for people who suspect they might have contracted the virus.

Rowe added that if a person develops symptoms and suspects they have COVID-19, they should presume that they have it and quarantine. If they start to develop severe symptoms (chest pain or trouble breathing), they should seek emergency medical attention.

On a positive note, Rowe said the Grand Ronde community is seeing fewer than usual flu cases this winter, which might be a reflection of people who had previously declined to get flu shots getting them because of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Our flu rates right now are really good, especially being in December," she said.

Rowe said the Tribal clinic is working with its state partners to obtain COVID-19 vaccine doses when they become available in Oregon. However, she cautioned, the vaccine requires two doses spread out over three to four weeks. During that interval and up to two weeks after receiving the second dose, people will still need to follow public health guidelines as their bodies build up resistance to the virus.

"It won't be a quick fix," she said.

Tribal General Manager David Fullerton said the Tribal community is seeing the effects of family gatherings during the Halloween and Thanksgiving holidays that helped to spread the virus nationally.

"We're not seeing on the government side a lot of exposure at work," Fullerton said. "It is decisions people are making in their own personal lives and then bringing that to work and putting people at risk."

Fullerton also cautioned Tribal and community members not to spread something else — rumors about COVID-19 outbreaks. "Passing and sharing of inaccurate information doesn't help," he said, citing increased community anxiety and

"COVID fatigue" that is occurring.

Fullerton said that the Tribal government and casino are conducting aggressive contact tracing with three dedicated employees and that if an employee is suspected of having been in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19, they will be contacted by a Tribal contact tracer.

"Some of our efforts in that area are way more aggressive than you would see at the county level or the state level," he said. "It is perfect? No. But I think the aggressiveness and availability of our testing is what has kept the pandemic at bay for quite some time and continues to try and keep our numbers relatively low."

Many of the comments asked by those attending the Facebook Live event regarded the health and safety of Spirit Mountain Casino employees currently and as they continue working over the Christmas and New Year's holidays. The casino has stayed open during the recent statewide surge in cases while at least one casino — Chinook Winds in Lincoln City — closed on Dec. 1 to deep clean its facility.

Hernandez said that an upcoming Facebook Live event will feature Spirit Mountain Casino General Manager Stan Dillon and she held all questions regarding the gaming facility until then.

However, Kennedy added that the casino will continue to follow its health and safety plan and control its holiday crowds by limiting the availability of parking.

"That's a way of managing the crowd control so that there is not overcrowding in our casino and more exposure should someone have COVID," she said. ■

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