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“Lane County Emergency Management updates the local group with accurate information from the state and national levels by conference call. Then, the local group determines how this applies to us locally in the Florence area.”

The purpose of the joint meetings is to get credible and accurate information out to the local community and show “that all local agencies are on the same page with regards to emergency operations, including dealing with how to deal with a potential spread of the coronavirus,” Grzeskowiak continued. “All of the local groups have previously trained together for how to respond to other emergencies like a fire, earthquake or mass casualty incident.”

The letter came just one day after Oregon Gov. Kate Brown declared a state of emergency over the virus. As of Tuesday, 15 presumptive and confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported in Oregon, with the latest case being identified in Multnomah County — bringing the total number of counties reporting cases of COVID-19 to seven.

By comparison, neighboring Washington state currently has the highest number of reported cases of COVID-19 in the country, with 136 presumptive (meaning confirmed by state health officials but not yet confirmed by the CDC) and confirmed cases.

However, “We do think that even though we are reporting 15 cases, this disease is much more widespread in our community as many of these cases were identified as potential community transmission,” said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Oregon Health Authority (OHA) state health officer and epidemiologist, on Monday.

The declaration was issued to unlock a variety of resources to help prevent the spread of the disease, including:

- Creating more COVID-19 testing sites at more regional hospitals.
- Bringing in emergency volunteer healthcare professionals to add services, particularly in rural communities such as the Siuslaw region.
- Expanding telemedicine for remote care so patients can be screened, and in some cases treated, without exposing more people to the virus

To prevent the virus from spreading to and within the Siuslaw region, prevention will be key.

“The coronavirus should be treated like the flu or other infections that pass through communities or schools,” Grzeskowiak said.

These include Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations, such as washing hands with soap and water; covering coughs and sneezes; not touching hands, face or mouth; and avoiding sick people. All of these are still the best forms of preven-

tion. If school officials see a student who is sick or actively coughing in a classroom or work area, “Please send them to the office so that they can go home for monitoring and then make sure to have custodial services sanitize the area,” Grzeskowiak told his staff. If teachers believe they may have COVID-19, they should stay home and away from others. Instead of going directly to the hospital, they — as with the rest of the public — should call first.

“After being at home and symptoms like fever, coughing or shortness of breath are not getting better, call the hospital and professional medical staff will determine if someone needs to come to the hospital,” Grzeskowiak wrote. “If someone is directed to come to the hospital, medical staff will be properly prepared to receive them.”

This is done so hospital staff can properly organize prevention techniques and not put other patients in the waiting room at risk.

Again, there have been no incidences of transmission in the region or county, but if there were to be a spike, the district absentee rate would be a major first indicator of COVID-19 in the region.

“One of the few things that is actually trackable on how this might progress is student absences,” Grzeskowiak told the Siuslaw School Board in a meeting Friday night. “Typically, we are, on any given day, 7-8 percent absent, for whatever reason. When we hit 10 percent, we are in sanitation mode. We’re bringing in extra staff during the day and evening, and this

is when we start talking to Lane County Health.”

If the school is at 20 percent of the population absent due to illness, “There’s a good chance that we’ve got a wave coming that’s going to mandate a closure,” he said.

Getting 20 percent infection is not unheard of, as the school once battled an aggressive case of norovirus.

“We went from almost 10 to 20 percent in a day, with kids literally getting sick in the hallways,” Grzeskowiak said.

The school closed over a long weekend to do deep sanitation.

One middle school in Hillsboro, Ore., already experienced a student with COVID-19, but the school was advised by the OHA not to close. In that case, a student who had mild symptoms attended school last Tuesday before self-isolating at home.

The district contacted OHA, the Oregon Department of Education and the Washington County Health Department (WCHD), and it was determined not to keep the school open and do a deep clean.

“The unfortunate reality is that COVID-19 is in our community,” Hillsboro Superintendent Mike Scott wrote to students. “Updated guidance from OHA and WCHD is that closing schools may not be an effective method for stopping the spread of the virus. This is the same stance currently being taken by school districts in other major metropolitan areas and communities around the country and around the world.”

Despite the newly sanitized school and assurance of safety, 45 percent of that

school’s students opted to stay home once news broke about the infection.

Grzeskowiak stated that if there were any large-scale disruptions to the school schedule, it would most likely be students staying home out of fear of the virus, not actually contracting the virus itself. Another possibility for a modified schedule would be if Siuslaw Middle School is used as a triage and refuge center, which would force the school to split classes for those students in other buildings.

If the school does have to be closed down, the first five days would see no discernible change in education for the students. The district has enough professional development days left in the year to use as instructional days.

If the closure goes beyond that, the school will turn to online education for a large portion of the school, with teachers teaching modified courses on programs such as Facebook Live.

“We’re going to have kids that might have internet at home, but no computer, so we’re going to deliver them a Chromebook,” Grzeskowiak said. “If the kids are without internet, we can give them a paper equivalent.”

Class materials would be dropped off to students through bus stop points.

“Kids know where the bus stops are, whether they take the bus or not,” Grzeskowiak said. “We can get the word out by phone or email, deliver the materials on a Tuesday, and then pick them up on Friday.”

Drop off/pick up runs would also allow the school to deliver food to students throughout the week. As of now, the district has enough meals (around 10,000) to last students for two weeks, while programs like Food Backpack for Kids could use the drop-offs to deliver meals. The drop-off spots could be used for the broad-

er community as well.

The district is also speaking with programs such as Food for Lane County.

“They’re interested in delivering other staples while we’re making those runs,” Grzeskowiak said.

This schedule will allow staff to keep working throughout the week, either through teaching or preparing materials, so they do not have to miss paychecks.

If needed, Siuslaw School District also has backup water supplies, including hundreds of gallons of water and 6,000 water bottles that are used for field trips and sporting events.

“We could continue this plan for at least a month,” Grzeskowiak said, pointing out that anything beyond that would be unprecedented.

To be able to enact any of these procedures, multiple local, county and state authorities would have to be coordinated with, along with the help of the school board.

“From this meeting forward, if any board member feels more comfortable with meeting online, the staff has set up a way for us to do that,” School Board President Guy Rosinbaum said.

District staff provided the board with instructions on how to link up to an online platform where a majority of members could legally hold a public meeting.

For more information on disease prevention, the district provided the following links:

- Siuslaw School District: www.siuslaw.k12.or.us/notes-on-communicable-disease-prevention
- Oregon Health Authority: oregon.gov/oha/PH/DISEASES/CONDITIONS/DISEASESAZ/Pages/emerging-respiratory-infections.aspx
- CDC: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.htm

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