

HEALTH from page 1A

Dr. Doug Koekkoek said that nearly 80% of PeaceHealth caregivers had already been vaccinated.

On Sept. 1, local PeaceHealth officials released a statement about employee vaccination data in Lane County. While some new numbers were still coming in, "In the spirit of transparency, at this time we can offer the following range of unvaccinated caregivers: 350-500 (6-9%) caregivers for all areas of the PeaceHealth Oregon network, including hospitals, clinics and administrative

settings. Or, pulling just the hospital figures out of that total: 250-375 (6-9%) caregivers within PeaceHealth's four Lane County hospitals."

According to the health care network, this new policy is a reflection of the organization's commitment to ensure every patient receives safe care at PeaceHealth and is part of an approach to protect both caregivers and patients.

Ormersher echoed this, saying, "With the increase in COVID cases, it really is important at this time that we're taking every measure possible to prevent further spread." She said the messag-

ing around COVID hasn't changed that much since the pandemic began in March 2020 or since more of the community has become vaccinated.

"The mainstay of preventing spread is really the same ... wearing a mask, avoiding large gatherings, especially if you're in unmasked situations, and getting vaccinated," she said.

Even if someone does get the virus after getting vaccinated, "the vaccine does help," Ormersher said. "It reduces the length of illness — and that has been shown in multiple studies — it reduces the severity of illness, and it does reduce spread of the infection. You may see breakthrough cases, as no vaccine is 100% effective."

Two frequently-used vaccines, Pfizer, which earned FDA approval at the end of August, and Moderna, have about 80% efficacy in preventing infection. When added with social distancing, masking and avoiding close contact, health officials hope to see COVID numbers go down.

"An example of a close contact within a very short period of time is if you kiss someone. That's technically something you really shouldn't be doing," Ormersher said. "We could get into a long list of do's and don'ts. Kissing people equals high risk of COVID spread, but talking to someone in close contact without masks is moderate risk. Talking together, both with masks, is lower risk. Kissing someone with a French kiss is going to be a high risk of spread. You're very up close and personal at that point."

PeaceHealth is also working on other ways to decrease hospitalization due

to COVID-19. Beginning last week in Eugene and next week in Florence, the health care network is offering monoclonal antibody IV therapy. The goal of the treatment is to prevent hospitalizations, reduce viral loads and lessen symptom severity.

This treatment is a form of immunotherapy traditionally used for patients with cancer and other diseases and has shown to be effective for patients who have mild to moderate symptoms from COVID-19 and are at high risk of complications. The treatment also is active against the delta variant.

"Monoclonal antibodies are immune, lab-produced molecules designed to mimic the body's natural response to infection," Ormersher said. "With COVID-19, these antibodies are made to recognize and bind to a part of the SARS-Co-V2 virus — the so-called spike protein — that enables it to infect human cells."

She added, "The antibody will help prevent the virus from getting into ourselves, and then also notifies our body that this virus is there, and it needs to be attacked and destroyed."

Tests so far have shown the therapy to be effective at reducing hospitalizations by about 70%.

"This is really trying to help prevent you from even getting into the hospital," Ormersher said. "That's really the role of this monoclonal therapy so that you don't get severe enough that you even have to enter the door."

She said it's "a pretty big deal" that PeaceHealth Peace Harbor will be able to administer the therapy, as it will be one of two sites in the region.

"That's breaking news. I heard that just (Tuesday) morning," Ormersher said.

That means coastal residents referred for the treatment can stay local rather than drive to eastern Lane County.

It's just one of the avenues PeaceHealth has explored to keep the community safe.

"Right now, we need to be keeping our emergency rooms for emergencies other than COVID. People still get into accidents, people still have appendicitis, people still have heart attacks. We need to make sure we're taking care of everyone in the ER," Ormersher said.

It will require people to stick with safety mandates a little longer.

"In Oregon, we have done a phenomenal job early on with our social distancing and our masking. Everyone was really part of this and being a part of the solution. As we've gotten further along into this pandemic, people have become a little bit more weary ... and so people have become more lax in their response to COVID," Ormersher said. "Given this, we are seeing a lot more hospitalizations, because a lot more people are getting sick. This isn't just in the large communities. This isn't just in Eugene/Springfield. We're seeing increases in Florence and on the coast as well. So this is a problem that is occurring throughout Oregon, in general."

Help is coming however, this time in the form of National Guard service members who will provide support to staff at RiverBend in Springfield; PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center, University District in Eugene; and Cottage Grove Community Medical Center. The guard will be deployed through the month of September.

The timing is right on target, too.

"I can definitely see that people are tired," Ormersher said of health care staff. "We are stretched thin. We have nursing shortages, we have pharmacy shortages. Doctors are working areas that they don't normally manage routinely ... so they're not all in

their comfort zone. Our people are feeling tired, they're feeling stressed.

"And they really would like the message out there about masking and vaccinations. We really need to do everything we can to help prevent patients from getting sick, because coming in the hospital is just very difficult. It's not just COVID that we have to take care of."

Plus, local partnerships are forming between PeaceHealth and other health care organizations such as the Willamette Valley Cancer Institute and Nova Urgent Care.

"There is a lot of hope and a lot of community support that we're seeing within the healthcare system — where everyone's leaning on each other and getting the support needed to make sure that we can take care of patients the best we can, and provide the best services to our community as a whole," Ormersher said.

Members of the community, after all, are who the health care system are working to protect.

As the schoolyear begins, Ormersher said there is no news yet about vaccinations for youth under 12 years old, but those vaccinations may be approved by the end of the year.

She encouraged families to be ready for school.

"We're going back to the normal things we teach our kids when they talk about flu seasons — making sure you have good hand hygiene, making sure that you mask. If your child is sick, please do not send them to school. ... It is important to follow the school guidance and recommendations because they were put in place for a reason. Not just to make people mad, but as a societal benefit as a whole. I guess the theme of this is patience is a virtue that we need to continue to preach."

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