Local, State & Nation

Almost half of Oregon's virus deaths were from 9 long-term care facilities

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM — The coronavirus has had a devastating impact on nine long-term care facilities in Oregon, killing at least 24 people among 171 who have tested positive.

The fatalities represent almost half the total number of people in Oregon known to have died of COVID-19, according to data from state officials released late Saturday. In one facility alone, Healthcare at Foster Creek in Portland, nine of 35 people who became infected died, according to an announcement from the state coronavirus Joint Information Center.

"COVID-19 already has had a significant impact on Oregonians in long-term care facilities," said Fariborz Pakseresht, director of the state Department of Human Services. "We are saddened by the tragedies that have occurred, and our thoughts are with all the residents, staff and families who have been affected."

In response, the Oregon Department of Human Services and Oregon Health Authority have launched a multi-agency support team that will collaborate with local public health authorities to assess needs and to support facilities with rising numbers of residents and staff impacted by the virus.

Care facilities already receiving assistance include Healthcare at Foster Creek and Laurelhurst Village, another nursing facility in Portland. Laurelhurst Village is contracting with the state to use one of its standalone buildings as a 47-bed emergency health care center for COVID-19 patients.

"We are committed to working in partnership with the OHA and DHS to provide specialized care for people afflicted with COVID-19," said Laurelhurst Village Director Troy Perry.

In Oregon, at least 26 long-term care facilities — nursing, assisted living, residential care facilities and adult foster homes — have reported that either a resident or staff member or both have COVID-19. There are more than 2,200 long-term care facilities in Oregon.

Nine long-term care facilities have five or more COVID-19 cases. Most are in the Portland area, with others in Corvallis, Keizer, Lebanon, Sublimity and Newberg.

As of Sunday, the Oregon Health Authority was reporting a statewide death toll of 52 with a total of 1,527 cases.

The Joint Information Center indicated there were 25 deaths among long-term care facilities, but one of them may be a miscount, putting the actual total at 24. Authorities were not immediately able to resolve the discrepancy.

Meanwhile, testing capacity is ramping up. Legacy Health, which has hospitals and clinics in Oregon and Washington state, now has the ability to run more than 650 tests per day, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown noted on Twitter. Legacy says on its website that results from tests are available in about 15 minutes.

The virus causes mild to moderate symptoms in most patients, and the vast majority recover. But it is highly contagious and can be spread by those who appear healthy and can cause severe illness and death in some patients, particularly the elderly and those with underlying health conditions.

"Expanding Oregon's testing capabilities is a key part of the fight against COVID-19," Brown tweeted.

Health care operations cutting staff as virus restrictions trim revenue

PORTLAND (AP) — Two large health care operations in Oregon are furloughing employees and cutting costs because of a lack of revenue due to the coronavirus outbreak, furthering cuts to medical facilities in the state.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports the Oregon Clinic has furloughed about 820 employees. The Portland Clinic, another physician-owned chain, furloughed 180 employees and cut the pay and hours of 250 others last week.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on March 17 ordered that all elective and nonurgent medical procedures be cancelled or rescheduled until at least June 15 to preserve masks and other protective equipment for the state's COVID-19 response.

Richard Jamison, president of The Oregon Clinic, said the company has suffered an 80% decline in revenue. The Portland Clinic's inpatient revenue has fallen by 90%, said Dick Clark, president of the operation.

"We're all in the same spot," Jamison said. "If there isn't some sort of financial assistance or if things don't get back to normal most of the big groups will not survive."

The Portland Clinic also closed its downtown and Tigard clinics.

Jamison, at The Oregon Clinic, is trying to stay optimistic. The clinic began reducing staff hours and put some employees on furlough starting in mid-March. By the beginning of April, about 80% of the clinic's workers had been impacted.

Both The Oregon Clinic and Portland Clinic hope to bring furloughed staff back to full-time work in June.

Oregon's hospitals say they too are taking enormous financial hits and are seeking $200 million in state financial assistance.

Unemployment system has troubles

PORTLAND (AP) — People who've lost their jobs during the coronavirus outbreak have continued to have problems with Oregon's system to file for benefits.

The Oregon Employment Department apologized last week for a series of breakdowns in its system that has prevented many people from filing for benefits. About 270,000 people have lost their jobs in the past few weeks as the state's economy shut down.

Workers who successfully file their claims must refile each week to continue receiving benefits. The Oregonian/OregonLive reports that the employment department's filing system on Sunday instructed some laid-off workers to "Restart Your Claim" from the beginning. The system incorrectly told workers they had to start over because of changes in their employment status.

The Oregon Employment Department said Monday that Sunday's problems affected a "small portion" of people.

Gail Krumenauer, the department's communications director, said the department fixed an issue last week that erroneously directed people to restart their claim. Sunday's issue appears separate.

"We understand anyone's frustration who experiences an issue in a stressful time trying to seek unemployment benefits," Krumenauer wrote in an email. "We are compassionate about that difficulty, and want to do everything we can to serve the public to the best of our ability, while facing absolutely record-shattering levels of claims on a decades old legacy system. We truly apologize for any inconveniences anyone experiences."

CLAIMS

Continued from Page 1A

Weekly claims for the hardest-hit segment of the economy — accommodations and food services — also declined, from 47 from March 22-28 to 32 from March 29 to April 4.

Other categories:

HEALTH CARE/SOCIAL ASSISTANCE
- March 29-April 4, 13; March 22-28, 21; March 14-21, 0

MANUFACTURING
- March 29-April 4, 11; March 22-28, 19; March 14-21, 7

RETAIL TRADE
- March 29-April 4, 13; March 22-28, 15; March 14-21, 11

OREGON BRIEFING

Oregon farmer fined $100,000 for building riverside rock embankments

SALEM (AP) — To settle a federal Clean Water Act lawsuit, an Oregon farmer must pay a $100,000 civil penalty, remove two rock embankments and convert a field into a forest.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency filed the complaint against farmer Bill Case of Albany, Oregon, four years ago, saying he'd unlawfully reinforced the banks of the North Santiam River to prevent erosion, The Capital Press reported.

The federal agency claimed that Case had created rock levees along the river in 2009, 2012 and 2013 without getting a Clean Water Act permit, which subjected him to penalties of up to $37,500 per day.

Case claimed the rock embankments were necessary to keep sediment from polluting the river and to prevent floodwaters from eventually eroding his field. Case argued that he'd relied on advice from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that the embankments wouldn't fall under Clean Water Act jurisdiction as long as they were built outside the river.

However, in 2018, a federal judge ruled there was ample evidence that Case had broken the law by working below the river's ordinary high water mark.

Attorneys for Case and the EPA have now filed a proposed consent decree in the U.S. District Court for Oregon under which the farmer has agreed to pay the federal government a $100,000 civil penalty.

Case said he's been advised not to speak publicly about the case by his attorney, who couldn't be reached for comment.

Kent Hanson, the federal government's attorney, said the proposed consent decree will be published in the Federal Register and open for public comment before it can be finalized in court, as required in Clean Water Act enforcement cases.

Oregon Health & Science University performs first heart transplant in 2 years

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon Health & Science University officials say a heart transplant was performed there in late March, marking the first such procedure in the state since 2018.

A 68-year-old Oregonian is recovering at after receiving the transplant on March 27, hospital officials said. It's the first transplant at OHSU since the university's Heart Failure and Transplant Program reactivated last August. The hospital had to rebuild the program when five cardiologists and a transplant surgeon quit, and the state's only heart transplant program was put on hold in August 2018.

The departures followed a string of patient deaths in 2017, placing OHSU's program as among the worst places in the U.S. to receive a heart transplant, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

OHSU President Danny Jacobs committed to restarting the program and heavily recruited to replace the cardiologists who left.

Johannes Steiner, the transplant cardiologist OHSU hired in August 2019 to restart the program, said that the heart transplant team is happy with the results of the first transplant. Junior cardiologists Nalini Colaco and Luke Masha were hired shortly before Steiner.

Steiner is OHSU's only senior transplant cardiologist until April 13 when Deborah Meyers will take over as head of the transplant program.

Meyers directed heart failure programs at Salinas Valley Medical Center in Salinas, California, and Texas Heart Institute at Baylor University in Houston.

Providence Health in Portland also planned to start a rival heart transplant program after absorbing all of OHSU's patients and some of its staff. The hospital also earned a large donation from Nike founder Phil Knight and his wife, Penny. Providence has put those plans on hold during COVID-19.

Jacobs said that as long as the federal government doesn't change its guidance, OHSU is prepared to continue performing heart transplant and other life-saving procedures during COVID-19.

Reduced traffic could leave states short on road money

By David A. Lieb
Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — America's roads are a lot less congested, due to coronavirus shutdowns that have kept millions of commuters, shoppers and vacationers parked at their homes.

While that makes it easier to patch potholes, it also could spell trouble for road and bridge projects. The longer motorists remain off the roads, the harder it will be for states to afford repairs in the months and years ahead.

Reduced traffic volumes are expected to cause a sharp drop in state revenue from fuel taxes, tolls and other user fees that could force delays for thousands of projects nationwide unless the federal government intervenes.

"This is a critical need at the national level," said Patrick McKenna, president of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials and director of Missouri's transportation department.

Leaders of state transportation agencies have asked Congress for an immediate $50 billion to prevent major cuts to road and bridge projects over the next year and a half. As an economic stimulus, they also want Congress to authorize a long-term plan that doubles the amount of regular funding going to state transportation agencies.

The request comes as a majority of Americans are under government orders to remain home to try to slow the spread of the virus that causes the COVID-19 disease. For many, the virus causes mild to moderate symptoms such as a fever or cough. But for some, especially older adults and those with existing health problems, it can lead to more severe illnesses and death.

A $2 trillion federal stimulus package enacted last month included billions for public transit systems, publicly owned commercial airports and Amtrak passenger train service — all of which have seen sharp declines in customers as a result of the coronavirus. But it earmarked nothing for state highways and bridges.

Republican President Donald Trump and Democratic House leaders have expressed support for a big infrastructure spending plan as part of another economic stimulus bill. But similar pronouncements in previous years have failed to produce results.

In the meantime, some road and bridge projects already have been put on hold.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation has slashed its expected construction projects from 131 down to 38 for the upcoming budget year, a $2 billion reduction.

Ohio has delayed projects until next year on interstate highways in Columbus and Cincinnati because of the expected decline in fuel tax revenue.

Faced with a budget shortfall, Missouri has postponed $46 million for 18 road and bridge projects that had been priorities for local governments. As many as 299 additional projects valued at $785 million could be at risk without federal help, McKenna said.

Among the immediate deferments: a new highway interchange to provide direct access to the expanded Ozarks Medical Center in West Plains. The center's hospital, physician and specialty clinics are among the area's largest employers, serving about 40,000 patients in eight rural counties of southern Missouri and northern Arkansas.

See **Roads**/*Page 6A*

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