TRACING

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Case investigations are the first part of the process designed to help stem the spread of COVID-19.

Bourne telephones people who have tested positive and, by querying them about their movements during the past two weeks or so, compiles a list of people who need to be interviewed — the contact tracing part of the process.

Bourne said she's one of three case investigator/contact tracers who are on a rotating schedule to do their work from home during the weekend, as needed.

The workload, naturally, depends on the number of new cases.

But that's not the only factor.

The number of people who are interviewed for contact tracing ranges from just a few to more than a dozen, Bourne said.

Some weekends, she said, one person can handle the phone interviews.

But the past several weeks have been busier, with the county reporting more than half of its 352 cases, as of Thursday, Dec. 10, since Nov. 1.

Although the surge in new cases has kept investigators busy, Bourne said she's noticed a trend, at least among the infected residents she's interviewed.

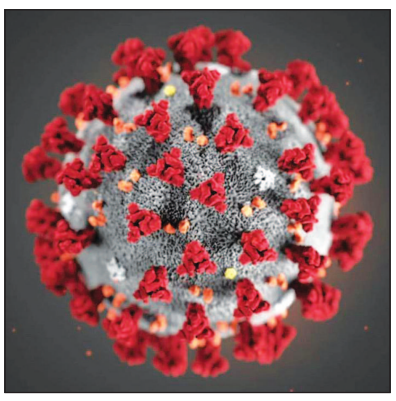
She doesn't have specific numbers, but Bourne said the people she's interviewed over the past several weeks for case investigations had fewer close contacts, on average, than what she recorded during the summer.

"I don't think people are going out as much," she said. "I think they're taking it more seriously."

Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, has emphasized that the biggest contributors to the county's rising number of infections are private parties and other social gatherings.

The guinea pig for training

Bourne laughs while explaining how she came to work as a case investigator and contact tracer.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

A COVID-19 particle.

"I was the guinea pig," she said.

Bourne was the first employee to take an online training course. That was in May, before COVID-19 had begun to spread in Baker County.

The county had only one positive case — reported on May 6 — until the last week of June.

Bourne said the training was "very in-depth."

After taking several online classes she participated in an eight-hour course that included making mock phone calls.

"It was a great training," Bourne said.

But even though she felt well-prepared, she concedes that she was "scared" to make her first actual phone calls to a county resident who had tested positive or identified as a close contact.

"You never really know what you're going to get as a response," Bourne said.

Even after many dozens of phone conversations, she still can't predict how the interview will turn out.

She's laughed with people, and she's listened to their sobs.

In one case investigation, the person who had tested positive had no symptoms and spent most of the interview telling jokes.

"That was a pretty fun interview," Bourne said.

But then there was the married couple, both of whom tested positive.

One spouse had serious symptoms and was being treated in a hospital. The other spouse was at home, waiting and worrying.

Bourne said that although she didn't do the contact tracing interview in that case, she empathizes with her colleague who did.

"That was a really tough situation," she said.

Listening and learning

Bourne said that although she has a specific list of topics to cover during interviews, she quickly realized that doggedly following a script wasn't always the most effective strategy.

The ability to adjust, based on the flow of the conversation, is crucial, she said.

Some people, for instance, will ask her questions that prompt queries from her that elicit information she might not have had otherwise.

Lending a sympathetic ear, and answering the inevitable questions from people who in some cases are frightened for themselves or their loved ones, are valuable skills, Bourne said.

"Some people just want to talk," she said.

Although the topics that she delves into are unpleasant — illness, missing work and other economic travails — Bourne said a large majority of the people she has talked with are friendly and cooperative.

"They're very nice and very agreeable, most of them," she said. "They are very understanding, they know this is our job."

Bourne said every person she's interviewed for a case investigation — those are residents who have tested positive — has been helpful.

That includes the one person who hadn't been notified of the positive test until Bourne telephoned.

(Typically residents already know they've been infected before the case investigator phones.)

That person was initially surprised, understandably, but was ultimately cooperative, Bourne said.

Not every contact tracing conversation has been so cordial, however.

Bourne said she's talked with a small number of people who, after she told them they had been in close contact with someone who tested positive, were skeptical or outright dismissive of the potential danger.

"There are people who don't believe the whole thing," she said.

One person she interviewed, in response to her recommendation that the person quarantine, refused to do so, pointing out that "bills don't quarantine."

Bourne noted that county officials can't require people to quarantine.

She said the county does send a letter to a person's employer in cases when the person is asked to voluntarily quarantine.

Bourne said she's interviewed a few people who had struggled financially due to quarantining, including one person who had just finished quarantining and then started again after being identified as a close contact for a second time.

But even in those cases, she said, most people willingly heed the county's recommendation.

Although for privacy reasons Bourne and other contact tracers, when doing interviews with close contacts, don't name the person who tested positive, she said the vast majority of people she's talked to already knew what had happened.

Most, she said, have talked to the person who tested positive before Bourne's phone call.

Bourne said about half of the people she calls for contact tracing have had symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

Contact tracing school classes

The resumption of in-person classes for Baker School District students in grades K-6 on Oct. 14 has had an effect on contact tracers, Bourne said.

As of Thursday, eight students have tested positive. According to the school district and the health department, none of those students was infected while at school, and there's no evidence that the infection has spread inside any school.

The school district protocol has all students who share a classroom with an infected student quarantine for two weeks.

Bourne said that although the school district notifies each of those students' families, the health department also does contact tracing interviews with each family. That means each positive case in a student necessitates a larger number of contact tracing interviews than usual.

Bourne said parents of students who quarantine, but who haven't themselves tested positive, often have questions. For instance, some parents wonder whether a sibling of a student who quarantines should do the same.

Bourne said siblings are considered "contacts of a contact," and are not asked to quarantine.

She said she and other contact tracers do ask parents to watch for potential symptoms, throughout the family, during the quarantine period.

County's case counts

Baker County's rate of new COVID-19 cases declined over the past week but remains well above the average for most of the pandemic. The county has recorded more than half of its total cases — 210 of 352, as of Thursday, Dec. 10 — since Nov. 1. Weekly case totals for the past month:

- Dec. 4-10 → 36
- Nov. 27-Dec. 3 → 49
- Nov. 20-26 → 29
- Nov. 13-29 → 37

SCHOOLS

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In both cases, as required by protocol, the District shared information with Baker County Health Department officials regarding those who had been in close proximity with the student and staff member for purposes of contact tracing and quarantining those people, Witty said.

Two South Baker classrooms totaling about 35 students have been quarantined as a result and will continue their studies through comprehensive distance learning up to the Christmas break, which will begin Dec. 18. Classes will resume after the holidays on Jan. 4.

Witty noted, as he has in the past, that neither the staff member nor the student contracted the virus while at school.

"I am grateful for the families who are remaining flexible as we quarantine students based on recommendations from Baker County Health Department," Witty said. "This is a critical step among several health protocols that mitigate the risk of COVID-19 spreading in our schools."

Witty said in an interview Friday that he talked that morning with representatives of the governor's office, department of education and educational leaders throughout the state.

As a result of the conversation, he said he is optimistic that schools in counties with fewer than 30,000 people — Baker County's population is about 16,800 — will be able to continue with in-person classes after the deadline for the "safe harbor" they've been operating under expires in early January.

Witty said Friday that he expects a decision next week on how schools will proceed in the new year.

"I believe in my heart we will be in school in the same fashion as we are right now," Witty said. "We all want to get as many students in school as feasible. Our workforce is supportive, the union leadership is supportive of getting students in class, and we've demonstrated we can do it safely."

Huntington

Huntington Superintendent Scott Bullock said Thursday, Dec. 10, that the change from half-day classes for his students in Grades 6-12 ended a week ago because of the number of students who had been in close proximity with those who tested positive for the virus.

This year's enrollment at the middle school level (Grades 6-8) is 19 and there are 32 students in Grades 9-12, Bullock said.

"We were never able to pinpoint where it actually came from," Bullock said of the positive test results and contact tracing that took place as a result.

There was no spread in the school, he said.

The two students and one staff member became ill over the Thanksgiving break and a second staff member was sick a few days later.

Prior to the students and employees testing positive, the secondary students had been attending in-person classes four hours a day, four days a week to study core subjects of English, math, science and social studies. The other three hours were devoted to online elective classes, Bullock said.

Limited in-person classes also were conducted in the afternoons for subjects such as metal fabrication, welding and woodworking that require hands-on instruction, he said.

The younger Huntington students — about 30 in kindergarten through fifth grade — have continued in-person classes four days a week.

Bullock said the Baker County Health Department advised that the younger students, who attend classes in a separate area of the building, were safe to continue coming to school because of the distance kept between them and the older students and staff.

Bullock, who's in his 16th year at Huntington, where he worked his first five years teaching high school history and has been the superintendent for the past 11 years, said he hopes all students will be able to return to in-person classes after the Christmas break.

"I definitely think these kids need to be in school," Bullock said.

He cites the benefits students miss when they are not attending classes in person.

"I think all the way around — for their mental health, their physical health — they are much better off being in school," Bullock said. "We have meals and everything else they need."

And then there is the control over their behavior that also works in the students' favor, he said.

"I watch them walk out the door and half way down the street, their masks are off and they are back in groups again," he said.

Despite the Chromebook computers that are available to all students and WiFi hot spots that have been made available to those who don't have internet at home, "online is rough on everyone," Bullock said.

"We've lost sports, the kids don't have that," he said. "These kids need to be back here."

Since the switch to total online learning for the older students, his secondary level teachers, all of whom also are working from home — some in communities in Malheur County and the Idaho town of Weiser — have reported that they've had a good turnout for classes.

"They're taking it more seriously this time around," Bullock said, compared to attendance seen last spring when students were graded on a pass-fail system.

The high school enrollment includes eight foreign exchange students from places including Vietnam, South Korea, Europe and South America, Bullock said.

Although Huntington has housed exchange students in a dorm setting for years, Bullock said he really hadn't planned to open that up this year, because of the pandemic. But the demand was high from program organizers and families interested in the program, and every agency that needed to sign off on the plan did so. And so the District welcomed the students.

The dorm houses girls on one end and boys on the other. The dorm parents, Yvonne and John Farber, are in the middle where the kitchen and dining room also are situated.

If the way Oregon schools operate doesn't change by next year, Bullock said the District probably would not offer the foreign exchange program.

"There's not a whole lot of things they can do," he said. "It's not fair to them, even though they knew what they were getting into."

Burnt River

The Burnt River School District, which also has housed foreign exchange students in the past, put its program on hold this year. Lyon, the superintendent, said she hopes the program can continue next year.

Both superintendents noted that keeping students and staff healthy and in school takes extra effort from all and adherence to the rules and guidance set forth by the Oregon Department of Education.

"From wearing masks to stringent cleaning protocols, the district must follow ODE requirements, plus keep the Oregon Governor's orders and OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) requirements in mind as well," Lyon stated.

Both the Huntington and Burnt River districts work not only with health department officials in Baker County, but also with those in adjoining Malheur County.

"If a challenge comes up, we are addressing it right away and letting our families know we are working on it," Lyon stated in the press release. "This is a difficult time for everyone, and more information, not less, is helpful right now."

CRASH

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The truck driver, Damian Lee Williams, 27, of Rupert, Idaho, was evaluated by paramedics but declined transport to a hospital, according to Hagedorn's report.

The trooper wrote that Williams "didn't really know what happened but might have been going too fast around the corner."

Hagedorn wrote that "witness statements and roadway evidence suggest speed was a factor in the crash."

He cited Williams for driving while his license was suspended, and failing to drive within his lane.

Hagedorn wrote in his report that Williams' dog, a red heeler named Drifter, ran from the scene and was not found.

Baker County Veteran Service Office will be closed December 14th through the 18th