

Shortage of employees leads to altered business models

Worker Shortage



SECOND IN A 5-PART SERIES

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH** and **ALEX WITTWER**

EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Enterprise isn't the largest town in Eastern Oregon, with a population of 2,052. But it's just a few miles from the ever popular town of Joseph and its vistas across Wallowa Lake to the peaks of the Eagle Cap Wilderness.

In a normal summer, Terminal Gravity Brewing in Enterprise would be busy all days of the week serving local, handcrafted beers to patrons and traditional brewpub fare. But due to a labor shortage this summer the company had to cut hours during its lunch rush, and close altogether on Tuesdays.

Natalie Millar, chief executive officer of the Wallowa County brewery, says that it's an inevitability that they'll have to close for even more days as their skeleton crew of cooks, servers and hostesses return to school — high school, to be exact.

"Heading into fall it is looking like we're going to have to cut an additional day and probably cut lunches," Millar said. "It is pretty brutal."

Demand for restaurant meals soared over the summer as restrictions lifted

across Oregon. Nearly all restaurants saw a huge uptick in customers. But where demand reached new heights, a new challenge appeared — staffing the restaurants which have balanced narrow margins and threats of closure over 2020.

In order to keep employees from burning out, Millar cut operating hours and closed down the brewery on Tuesdays to keep what employees she has from becoming overwhelmed in an industry well known for its high turnover rate and low wages.

"I think we've reached the mindset of 'we have what we have,'" she said. "We'll keep hiring as much as possible, but we need to understand that we've got to adjust with what the situation is instead of waiting for the situation to adjust itself."

Not much change

Millar is not alone. Several restaurants across the region have reported challenges with hiring workers over the summer. Some blamed expanded federal unemployment benefits as the culprit for lower workforce participation, even though the region has seen lower unemployment benefits claims now than it had before the pandemic started. Others recognized the high cost of living, taxes and low supply of housing which has made rents and home prices balloon.

Millar explained that while business picked up considerably over the summer, the lack of staffing and overburdened industry has a cascading effect with other restaurants, causing a feedback loop of demand and short supply. As one business cuts its hours, patrons



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Mariah Davis pours out an IPA for a flight of beers for customers at Terminal Gravity Brewery and Pub on Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Terminal Gravity recently closed down operations on Tuesdays following a staff shortage. Many of the kitchen staff are high school students, who have returned to school, leaving the brewpub further short staffed.

look elsewhere for a meal.

"It's a funny, weird thing where I think we would all be excited if there were three more restaurants because we just need more places to send people to eat so it's a unique situation over here," Millar said.

Earlier this summer, Baker City's Main Event Sports Bar and Eatery was experiencing severe worker burnout in June due to staffing shortages which led to closing the restaurant on Tuesdays.

The situation there has changed little. While the sports bar is open seven days a week, they've had to cut evening hours, close earlier and open later throughout the week.

"We're very, very busy. On Sundays and Mondays we're one of the only restaurants

open on Main Street so we're extremely busy, but extremely short staffed," said Jessica Eastland, manager at Main Event Sports Bar and Eatery. "If we had an adequate staff, it would be a very profitable time for us but that's the thing — we've got people who are working overtime hours when we could have had other employees working those hours so that we weren't paying more in wages. Our wages right now are through the roof because we have so many employees that are working overtime every single week because we are so short staffed."

Rolling with the punches

For Bruce Rogers, COVID-19 has presented the challenge of keeping not one, but two businesses profit-

able. Bruce and his daughter, Harvey, own both Timber's Feederly in Elgin and Local Harvest in La Grande.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unimaginable challenges in staffing for both restaurants. With the shortage of workers and revolving mandates for public dining, the owners have adjusted to rolling with the punches.

"This far into it and with what we've seen, the rules have changed and the rules are different and will change again," Bruce Rogers said. "We're just chameleons at this point. We just change and go with the flow while doing our best to remain a profitable business."

On top of the shortage of workers, Timber's Feederly is facing a hurdle as Harvey Rogers takes maternity leave. She said she typically works open to close every day, and her absence has forced Timber's to limit orders to takeout and outdoor dining for the time being.

Closing indoor dining is a technique that the owners used on both restaurants to save costs with a limited staff during the early part of the pandemic. The Rogerses looked at new ideas in order to stay afloat during unstable times.

"When you couldn't have inside dining, we switched over to to-go and delivery only," Bruce Rogers said. "We had to start up a delivery service to remain competitive at that point, but when we opened back up again we shut the delivery off."

Both Timber's Feederly and Local Harvest changed hours from seven days a

week to five days a week, and both close an hour earlier than they used to. One advantage to owning two restaurants is the ability to rotate staff from one location to another if one restaurant is short.

"We have several employees that are able to work at both places, mostly our top three people are very versatile for us," Bruce Rogers said. "They fill in everywhere for us."

Older, younger helping fill gaps

With pandemic-related federal unemployment programs ending on or before Monday, Sept. 6, Bruce Rogers is expecting an increase in prospective employees. In addition, students returning to attend Eastern Oregon University in the fall are promising for filling positions.

To cope with employment challenges, the owners have adjusted the scope of employees compared to who they would typically hire in the past.

"The demographics have changed," Bruce Rogers said. "We've started hiring younger people and we've started hiring older people. When we find people that are qualified, we try to snatch them up."

Bruce Rogers noted that both restaurants have been hiring both younger and older employees than in the past. The restaurant hired two 16-year-olds in the summer and had a family friend who is a retired teacher come work for the restaurants.

"We've leaned on friends and family to help us through this time as well," he said.

Idaho patients in hospital halls amid COVID rationed care

By **REBECCA BOONE**

Associated Press

BOISE — Amid the Idaho coronavirus surge that prompted officials to authorize hospitals to ration health care, Army soldiers sent to one hospital have traded their fatigues for personal protective equipment to help treat a flood of infected patients.

The conference center at Kootenai Health hospital in Coeur d'Alene has been converted into a field hospital of sorts — with some of its classrooms filled with hospital beds where patients receive oxygen or get monoclonal antibody treatment, hospital officials said.

At the nearby main hospital building in the city of about 50,000, some emergency room patients receive care in a converted lobby and others get it in hallways. Urgent surgeries have been put on hold and some patients in critical condition are facing long waits for intensive care beds.

The hospital is licensed for 200 regular medical beds — not including the ones designed for children, women giving birth and people experiencing a mental health crisis — and on Wednesday had 218 "med surge" patients, said Jeremy Evans, the hospital's COVID-19 incident commander.

Meanwhile, about 500 of its roughly 3,600 clinical and staff positions are empty, he said, forcing managers to ask administrative staffers and others to take on additional work like cleaning hospital rooms.

The overwhelmed hospital is at the epicenter of a coronavirus crisis for the northern part of the state — and where state officials this week authorized "crisis standards of care" status.

That allowed Kootenai Health, where an entire floor has been turned into a makeshift COVID-19 unit, and other hospitals in the region to ration health care during the surge.

Public health officials are warning the health care rationing could soon spread statewide, forcing already traumatized doctors and nurses to make gut-wrenching decisions about who will get life-saving care.

Newly confirmed coronavirus infection cases in Idaho are surging and the state is now averaging more than 950 new cases every day, according to Johns Hopkins University — an increase of more than 41% over the past two weeks.

Idaho is also last among U.S. states with only about 45% of residents having received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Just under 40% of residents are fully vaccinated, making Idaho 48th the nation compared to other states and Washington, D.C.

"For the rest of the state, we remain dangerously close to crisis standards of care," Idaho Department of Health and Welfare Director Dave Jeppesen warned Tuesday, when there were just nine available intensive care unit beds in the entire state.

The crush of patients has forced Kootenai Health into "doing things that were not normal — way outside of normal — at times," said hospital chief of staff Dr. Robert Scoggins.

"Almost every day at this point we are having cardiac arrest from patients when their oxygen levels dip too low and we can't supply them with enough oxygen," he said.

Kootenai Health recently installed a larger oxygen tank in an effort to treat all the patients. If the hospital's caseload grows, Scoggins said, the hospital's oxygen delivery infrastructure — the actual pipes that run through the walls — may not be able to handle the demand.

While many of northern Idaho's smaller, rural hospitals have not been forced to ration health care, they frequently have no place to send their critically ill patients who would normally be trans-

ferred to Kootenai Health.

Hospitals in neighboring Washington state would normally help with the overflow, but they are also full of patients, Jeppesen said.

Peter Mundt, the spokesman for Gritman Medical Center in the Idaho city of Moscow said the institution is struggling to find hospital destinations to transfer patients with serious heart problems and other conditions unrelated to COVID-19.

"Our ability to accommodate non-COVID patients is very strained at this point," Mundt said. "Even though we're all different hospitals, we normally work together as collaborative colleagues and peers. We need it to work as a giant system and that system is just under severe strain right now."

In Lewiston, St. Joseph Regional Medical Center is also operating "at the very edge of our capacity," spokeswoman Sam Skinner said.

"Our current situation is worse than it's ever been," Skinner said. "As we continue to see the COVID-19 surge in our community, the impact on one hospital can quickly have this rippling effect. Our low community vaccination rates are putting an incredible burden on our community."

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare moved northern and north-central Idaho into the crisis designation Monday evening, giving hospitals a legal and ethical template to use while rationing care.

The designation will remain in effect until there are enough resources — including staffing, hospital beds and equipment or a drop in the number of patients — to provide normal levels of treatment to all patients.

Under the guidelines, patients are given priority scores based on a number of factors that impact their likelihood of surviving a health crisis.

Those deemed most in need of care and most likely to benefit from it are put

on priority lists for scarce resources like ICU beds.

Others in dire need but with lower chances of surviving will be given "comfort care" to help keep them pain-free whether they succumb to their illnesses or recover.

Other patients with serious but not life-threatening medical problems will face delays in receiving care until resources are available.

Jeppesen stressed Tuesday that vaccines are the best way to reduce the demand on hospitals. Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention shows that full vaccination with any of the currently available coronavirus vaccines dramatically reduces the risk of requiring hospitalization for a coronavirus infection.

State health officials have also asked people to not go to emergency rooms for asymptomatic coronavirus tests or other matters that can be handled in doctor's offices, but said no one should hold off emergency room visits for potentially serious conditions. They warned people to be prepared to wait for care.

Idaho's hospitals have struggled to fill empty nursing, housekeeping and other health care positions, in part because some staffers have left because they are burned out by the strain of the pandemic and because others have been quarantined because they were exposed to COVID-19.

Late last month, Idaho Gov. Brad Little called in 220 medical workers available through federal programs and mobilized 150 Idaho National Guard soldiers to help hospitals cope with the surge.



QUAIL RIDGE GOLF COURSE PRESENTS

Veteran's Appreciation Day!

FREE Golf for Baker & Union County Veterans & their families*

FREE BBQ from 11am - 1pm

*Family includes spouse/partner and dependents

*Cart & club rentals included

VETERAN SERVICES & INFO WILL BE AVAILABLE AT THE CLUBHOUSE.

PARTICIPANTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO CALL AHEAD FOR TEE TIMES (9AM TO 2PM). PLEASE CALL 541-523-2358.

CURRENT STATE COVID GUIDELINES WILL BE FOLLOWED.

Sunday, September 12, 2021
9am to 3pm

