

Omicron variant found in Oregon

By GARY A. WARNER

Oregon Capital Bureau

The omicron variant of COVID-19 has been confirmed in Oregon, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Oregon Health & Science University's laboratory detected the variant Monday, Dec. 13 in samples from three Multnomah and Washington County residents in their 20s and 30s. All were fully vaccinated and two had traveled internationally, to Canada and Mexico, prior the onset of symptoms.

"We recognize this news is concerning to many people," said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, health officer and state epidemiologist at the Oregon Health Authority, in a statement released late Monday. "However, if history is our guide, we do know that even if a vaccine doesn't target a specific variant, the strong immune response you get from being fully vaccinated can still be highly protective against severe disease from all COVID-19 variants."

Sidelinger said the health authority would continue to monitor the spread of omicron in Oregon with individual-level and community-level variant surveillance. He stressed that "vaccination remains the best protection against COVID-19 infection and transmission, including most circulating variants." Other protective measures,



Dave Killen/The Oregonian-TNS

Oregon Health & Science University issued a new COVID forecast predicting a continued high level of coronavirus hospitalizations and the potential for a new wave of infections from the omicron variant.

including wearing masks indoors and in crowded outdoor settings, physically distancing from others, washing hands regularly and staying home when sick, will also help protect against the spread of COVID-19, he said.

Much of the pandemic focus in recent weeks has been on the omicron variant discovered Nov. 11 in southern Africa.

The highly mutated variant has since spread to 70 countries. Scientists around the world have no consensus yet on how contagious and

virulent the new variant will be. Early studies indicate it is twice as contagious but of similar or lesser virulence.

The United Kingdom announced its first omicron-related death on Monday.

Monday's news came as Oregon braced for a possible sixth wave of COVID-19 infections as a new spike spreads rapidly across the United States.

Nationwide, new infections are up 43% compared to two weeks ago. Oregon is one of only 10 states that is not reporting an increase in cases

compared to two weeks ago. The pandemic has claimed over 5.3 million lives around the globe.

The United States just passed 50 million infections and is on pace to surpass 800,000 deaths within the next few days, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. Oregon has had 401,564 cases and 5,420 deaths.

While much attention has been focused on omicron, the current spike in the United States is driven by yet another surge in the delta variant.

Omicron spreading fast in Washington

SEATTLE (AP) — The omicron variant is spreading at an alarming rate in Washington state, doubling in case numbers each day, one of the highest rates in the country. It is leading to a call for people to get vaccinated and take extra precautions as we head into the holidays.

Researchers at the University of Washington Medicine lab knew the omicron variant could spread quickly, but not this fast. In just three days the variant doubled in positive test size each day from 3 percent to 7 percent to 13 percent, KOMO-TV reported.

"What was surprising was how fast that curve appears to have taken off," said Dr. Pavitra Roychoudhury of UW Medicine. "Just the steepness of the rise and the percentage of potential omicron cases."

Respiratory therapist Liz Lewis at St. Joseph Medical Center in Tacoma said she's worried there will be an uptick in hospitalizations when they are already facing staffing shortages even though the variant may not be as harmful as the delta variant.

She and other medical leaders said the best way to combat the quick spread of the omicron variant is to get vaccinated. The governor said it's important to take the next step and get the booster to protect you against the omicron variant.

Winter cold and gatherings indoors are blamed for high case numbers, with New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Maine and Minnesota all reporting 75 cases or more per 100,000 people.

But the rise in cases is spreading beyond the original outbreaks in the northeast and upper Midwest.

Florida, Texas, California, Missouri and Connecticut reported cases had doubled over the past two weeks.

Infection rates are rising across the country. Oregon is one of just 10 states — all but

one west of the Mississippi — that has not reported a rise in cases compared to the past two weeks. But data showing a "flat" growth curve is based on reports from last week.

The Oregon Health & Science University's weekly forecast, last released Friday, had good news but worries about Oregon's immediate future in combating COVID-19.

"Case rates returned to pre-Thanksgiving levels, suggesting that Thanksgiving itself did not create a wave of infections," the report said.

Oregon lawmakers OK rent, drought relief in one-day session

By PETER WONG

Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon lawmakers cleared the way in a scripted special session for \$100 million more in state rental assistance and \$100 million more for local efforts to prevent evictions.

During the one-day special session on Monday, Dec. 13, lawmakers also approved \$25 million for enforcement against illegal cannabis-growing in Southern Oregon and \$18 million for resettlement of up to 1,200 refugees who fled after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. They also released \$100 million already set aside for relief from the continuing drought in outlying areas of Oregon.

Portland, Gresham, Hillsboro and Beaverton are among the 14 cities that will receive \$1 million each to deal with homelessness.

Adjournment took place at 7:03 p.m.

Gov. Kate Brown called the special session, the year's second, to approve more rental assistance and extend the grace period for evictions stemming from the coronavirus pandemic. But the final agenda came together just a few days beforehand, when Brown and legislative leaders from both parties agreed to include a few other items.

"There was no plan. No agreement. Success was not guaranteed. Your Legislature worked hard since that day," Senate President Peter Courtney, the veteran Salem Democrat, said.

"Oregonians can be proud of their legislators today, Democrat and Republican. We came together to send relief — hope — to Oregonians in crisis."

Minority Republicans had resisted a special session, though not the rental assistance, which they said could have been approved by the 20-member Emergency Board.

Majority Democrats said only the full Legislature could extend the grace period for evictions. The E-Board cannot pass legislation.

Impetus for session

Although some cities and counties are still accepting them, the Oregon Department of Housing and Community Services stopped new applica-

tions for rental assistance after Dec. 1. Agency officials said that pending applications were likely to consume the rest of the \$289 million available from federal funds — \$180 million has been paid out to landlords as of Dec. 11 — and the state still would not have enough to cover all pending requests.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, called for a special session months ago.

"Today, we kept our promise and protected thousands from losing their homes this winter," she said, along with other priority items.

"I'm appreciative of the bipartisan work that led to this

successful emergency special session to provide relief for every part of the state."

The \$200 million that lawmakers drew from the state budget a year ago for rental assistance has been spent. Oregon has applied for \$200 million more in federal aid from the U.S. Treasury, but that money is unlikely to come until spring — and even if it comes, it will be the last installment.

Meanwhile, more than 10,000 applications, many of them in the three Portland metro counties, are past the grace periods established by state law and county actions. State law allows 60 days from

when a tenant has informed a landlord about an application being filed; in Multnomah and Washington counties and the city of Beaverton, it is 90 days.

"During wintertime, we want to make sure Oregonians are kept whole," said

Sen. Kayse Jama, D-Portland, who leads the Senate housing panel. "We also want to make sure that landlords who are struggling get the resources they need."

Senate Republican Leader Tim Knopp of Bend helped broker the deal after Repub-

licans resisted the initial call for a special session.

"We do have people with the possibility of being evicted," he said. "We do have landlords who still have to be made whole. There have been several hundred million dollars already spent."

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