

Oregon spent \$2.4M on a digital COVID-19 vaccine card few using

BY FEDOR ZARKHIN

The Oregonian
Oregonians have used the state's \$2.4 million digital COVID-19 vaccine card program only about 50,000 times, far less than people in Washington used their state's app and at more than twice the cost.

Oregon released its vaccine card web application in late April, with fanfare, providing Oregonians with a method to obtain digital proof that they've been vaccinated against COVID-19 in the form of a scannable QR code.

In theory, that meant people didn't have to fear losing their paper vaccine card or fret about forgetting it at home, while businesses would have an easy and efficient way to confirm patrons' vaccination status.

But whether Oregonians have decided they don't need the digital card or simply haven't heard it is available, it's clear relatively few are opting to use it.

As of June 30, about 45,000 Oregonians had downloaded QR codes showing proof of vaccination a total of 50,730 times, with 6,000 repeat users. That amounts to one download for every approximately 83 Oregonians, and one download for every 63 Oregonians who have received at least one shot of the COVID-19 vaccine.

That rate is nearly 11 times smaller than what Washington achieved about three months after it made digital vaccine cards available in October.

The difference in timing may have made all the difference.

By the time Oregon made the vaccine card web application available April 25, COVID-19 restrictions were already being lifted and the state and country were moving psychologically past the pandemic. That, said one national expert on immunization information tech systems, may explain why so few people went on to download a QR code.

"There was a little more of a



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin file

Pfizer COVID-19 vaccinations sit on a tray ready to be administered during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at the Downtown Bend Public Library.

COVID focus in the fall and a little bit less in early 2022," said Mary Beth Kurilo, a senior director at the American Immunization Registry Association.

The Oregon Health Authority, which is responsible for the state's application, agreed. Washington launched its vaccine card application during a surge in cases while Oregon did not, spokesperson Rudy Owens said in an email. The states also had different vaccine requirements when the tools launched.

Oregon officials say how many people actually use a state-issued digital vaccine card is not what matters most. "The download rate isn't something we are measuring as indicative of project success," Owens said in an email.

Instead, Owens said, the agency focused on making the application accessible to as broad a swath of the population as possible, "intentionally" launching it slower than neighboring states as Oregon consulted with the community on how to make the roll out equitable and accessible.

Kurilo praised Oregon's approach, saying it serves as a model for the kind of health

equity focus other states should have. While it may have taken longer to get off the ground than vaccine cards in other states, the work Oregon put into making a digital vaccine card accessible to all puts the state in a good position if future COVID-19 surges prompt more restrictions or vaccine requirements.

"The solution Oregon built is a lasting one," Kurilo said. But if raw uptake is a measure of success, then Oregon's program has performed abysmally compared to its neighbors to the north and south.

About three months after Washington's October launch, the digital vaccine cards were downloaded 1 million times, or once for roughly every 7.7 residents of the state. As of July 1, Washingtonians had downloaded cards 1,250,000 times.

"I feel that having over 1 million downloads in less than a year speaks to success," Washington Department of Health official Chris Baumgartner said in an emailed statement.

In California, 8.2 million people have so far downloaded QR codes proving vaccination status, out of a total population

of 39 million. The state was among the earliest to launch a digital vaccine card, first made available in June 2021. It made the code supporting the web application available to other states for free.

"The rapid development and launch of (the vaccine card) was significant in increasing vaccination rates and kickstarting economic activity," a spokesperson for California's health agency said in an email.

To be sure, Oregon's web app has been available less than three months, compared to the full year California's has been open to the public and eight months Washington's app has been available.

Oregonians to vote on gun control measure

BY PETER WONG

Oregon Capital Bureau
Oregon voters will decide Nov. 8 whether to require firearms training and ban high-capacity ammunition magazines.

The Oregon Elections Division said a ballot initiative to do so has qualified for the general election. The state validated 131,671 of the 160,498 petition signatures (82%) submitted by sponsors. The number was more than the 112,020 required, based on 6% of the votes cast for governor in the 2018 election, a standard fixed by the Oregon Constitution.

Voters will see a total of four measures on the general election ballot, two initiatives that qualified by petition and two constitutional amendments referred by the Legislature.

This measure would limit ammunition magazines to 10 rounds each. In addition to the limit, the measure would require people to undergo classroom and live-fire training before they obtain a firearms permit, and complete background checks. (Current law allows a purchaser to obtain a gun even if the check is incomplete after three days; the measure would compel the check to be completed.)

Lift Every Voice Oregon, the movement that sponsored it and a second potential measure, was way behind at the end of May when an initial round of 2,500 signatures was submitted.

But two mass shootings outside Oregon resulted in a surge of petition volunteers

and signatures before the July 8 deadline.

Ten Black people were shot dead May 14 in a supermarket in Buffalo, and 19 children and two teachers died 10 days later at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.

The Rev. Dr. W.J. Mark Knutson, pastor of Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland, said those events helped produce more than 1,000 new volunteers and 150,000 more signatures.

"People were saying they could not sit anymore, so we had 1,000 new volunteers come forward to join the 500," Knutson said in an interview earlier in July. "A lot were parents with children — it was pretty amazing. They are learning about democracy."

"The process is as important as the result — democratic action by the people. In this nation right now, we need to see democracy at work?"

Movement leaders shelved a second ballot measure that would have banned some assault weapons. Knutson said leaders hope to present it as a bill to the 2023 Legislature, which opens Jan. 9.

The measure joins three others on the general election ballot.

The other initiative, which has already qualified, would bar lawmakers from seeking re-election if they have 10 or more absences not excused by the House speaker or Senate president. That initiative was put forth by public employee unions and others in response to walkouts by Republican legislative minorities in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Nationwide mental health crisis line, 988, launches

BY JAMIE PARFITT AND PAT DOORIS

KGW News
PORTLAND — July 16 marked the launch of 988, the three-digit hotline for getting help in a mental health crisis — meaning that these calls will soon be accessible in the same way that emergency services are through 911.

The big lingering concern is whether Oregon is prepared for what could be a surge in calls prompted by the greater accessibility of the resource. Stakeholders say that the state should be on the right track. Hotlines have been working to hire more call takers, and the initial bump in call volume is expected to level off soon before following a steadier upward trajectory in the next few years.

In June, KGW's Pat Dooris spoke with Dwight Holton, head of Lines for Life. Call takers at the Portland-based nonprofit help 37,000 people per year with a variety of issues involving mental health and drug abuse. The current phone number, 800-273-8255, is 10 digits long. As of July 16, they can be reached by simply dialing 988.

"Really excited. 988 is gonna be a new service, a new way to reach help when you're in crisis," said Holton.

As CEO of Lines for Life, Holton offered ideas during the development of the new nationwide plan. He believes that the simple number will make a big difference.

"We've had, for many years, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline," Holton said. "What

988 is gonna do is transform that by making it super easy to get help when you're in crisis or when you see someone else in crisis. Just like we have 911 for when you have a police or fire emergency, we'll have 988 for when there's a mental health crisis."

One of the things Holton mentioned is key — the hotline will also be available to call when someone else is in crisis, not just the caller. The 988 number will allow you to report when people seem to be struggling, and when things work as intended, a mental health specialist will respond.

The idea, similar to Portland Street Response, is to take some of the load from police and emergency dispatchers — not just in big cities but in any community in the U.S.

"We believe there's a real opportunity here to take some of

that need and bring it to 988, because lots of the folks that are calling 911 are really calling about a mental health challenge," Holton said. "And that's not an appropriate law enforcement role — that's not what they're trained to do and it can be dangerous."

It remains to be seen how this part of the program will work at the outset, when these kinds of crisis response programs are still in their infancy — if they exist at all — in many areas of the country.

But Oregon may be ahead of the curve compared to many other states. Portland Street Response is expanding, if overwhelmed by the number of calls for service. Meanwhile, its Eugene-area forerunner practically set the standard that other nascent crisis response programs aspire to.

See **Hotline** / A6

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