

# LOCAL, STATE & REGION

## ‘WE FAILED THEM’

*New data shows disproportionate virus infection rates of Hispanic residents in hard-hit county*

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New data released by the Umatilla County Public Health Department shows what was long understood but had yet to be disclosed — Hispanic residents have been disproportionately infected with COVID-19 in the county.

Residents reporting Hispanic ethnicity accounted for 41% of Umatilla County’s total COVID-19 cases in 2020, compared with 34% from non-Hispanic residents and 25% from residents whose ethnicity was unknown, according to a report released by the health department this week.

In addition, the county’s Hispanic population tested positive at a rate about three times higher than non-Hispanic residents in 2020, the data shows.

“We failed them,” said Jose Garcia, chair of the Hispanic Advisory Committee in Hermiston. “We failed some communities. Because for every death that happened in Umatilla County, there was a family involved.”

Hispanic or Latino people make up nearly 28% of Umatilla County’s population, according to 2019 U.S. Census data.

“I did anticipate that, just from everything I’d seen so far,” Halley Maloy, the county’s epidemiologist, said of the new data showing the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on the Hispanic community.

The report, which Maloy assembled over the last several months, details a variety of trends and data points related to the pandemic, from hospitalizations to reported deaths and infection rates based on traits like age, gender, race and ethnicity.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian photos

**ABOVE:** A Umatilla County Public Health billboard along U.S. Highway 395 outside of Hermiston encourages people to stay home if they are sick, with messages in English and Spanish, on March 15. Newly released data from the health department confirms reports that Hispanic residents have been disproportionately infected with COVID-19.



**LEFT:** Jose Garcia interviews a caller about an experience with COVID-19 during Radio La Ley’s “La Voz Del Pueblo” in January. The Spanish language radio program aimed to help dispel rumors about COVID-19 and share firsthand accounts of those who were dealing with the virus.

Hispanic residents make up a sizable portion of both Umatilla and Morrow counties’ essential workforce, officials from both counties say, often working in food factories and other large agricultural industries where they are at increased risk of infection, and in some cases going home to multi-generational households afterward.

“They were hit hard by this,” Joe Fiumara, Umatilla County’s public health director, said of the pandemic’s impact on the Hispanic community. “Whether we didn’t get messaging to them, whether they (had to) come into work because they needed a paycheck or couldn’t do the work remotely — I think all of those

things play into that. And I think this data supports those assumptions.”

Since the early months of the pandemic, national data has shown that Black and Latino people are infected, hospitalized and die from COVID-19 at especially high rates. The disparities spanned across the country in hundreds of urban, suburban and rural areas and counties, and in all age groups, according to The New York Times.

Researchers point to socioeconomic status, unequal access to health care, and workplace exposures in front-line, essential and critical infrastructure jobs as factors contributing to such disparities.

Similar disparities have been reported in nearby Morrow County, where Hispanic residents have accounted for nearly 57% of the county’s 1,053 total coronavirus cases, according to data provided by county officials on Friday, March 12. And of the county’s 14 reported deaths, six were reported from Hispanic residents.

About 38% of Morrow County’s population is Hispanic or Latino, according to 2019 U.S. Census data.

### LOCAL & STATE BRIEFING

#### OSU-Cascades registering high schoolers for Summer Academy program in August

Registration for Summer Academy programs at Oregon State University-Cascades this August is now open.

The five-day program includes a choice of either business or arts/technology classes, along with outdoor activities like rock climbing and floating the Deschutes River.

Incoming high school sophomores, juniors and seniors can register for the program at the university’s website, according to an OSU-Cascades press release.

All students who finish one of the five-day sessions will earn a \$500 scholarship to OSU-Cascades, the release stated.

The two sessions will be held from Aug. 9-13 and Aug. 23-27, the release stated. Registration costs \$599 per student, and space is limited to 60 students.

#### Oregon auditors: Some COVID-19 deaths in senior care were preventable

State auditors say Oregon health officials’ failure to adequately prepare for COVID-19 likely contributed to some senior care home coronavirus deaths early in the pandemic.

The two state agencies responsible for responding to the pandemic wasted “valuable time” in the first few months after Oregon’s first case as they tried to figure out how to work together, the Secretary of State Oregon Audits Division found in a report released Wednesday.

More than 90 people eventually died in outbreaks that began while state agencies were building a new administrative system.

The Department of Human Services and the Oregon Health Authority did not plan “basic elements for responding together,” the auditor’s office wrote. “These elements were developed after the response began, delaying actions that may have prevented illness and death among long-term care residents and staff.”

About half of all COVID-19 deaths in Oregon were long-term care residents, auditors said, compared to just over a third nationally. As of March 14, 1,210 people in congregate care had died.

Auditors listed a number of suggestions. Going forward, the state should track how many workers get vaccinated and find a way to potentially make that data public, citing troubling trends showing that health care workers have been declining to get shots.

— Bulletin staff and wire reports

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