

LOCAL, STATE & REGION

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Overwhelmed by pandemic, health care workers turn to the hospital chaplains

BY **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The patient had been fighting in the intensive care unit for weeks, and the nurse had grown attached.

He was younger than most COVID-19 patients admitted to CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton. It was August, and the delta variant was raging through Oregon, filling hospitals with patients and exhausting health care workers.

A record number of Umatilla County residents who contracted the virus died that month. He was one of them.

Ann Marie Hardin, a hospital chaplain, was called in to help with the next steps, telling the family and the funeral home. She turned a corner and saw the nurse, who burst into tears and fell into Hardin's arms.

"She felt that it was such a waste," Hardin said. "The patient was young. Had the patient been vaccinated, there potentially could have been a different outcome. And that was really hard to process for her. She felt that it shouldn't have had to happen. He shouldn't have had to die. And she looked to me as a safe place to lay some of that sadness."

Hardin did what she has done throughout the pandemic — she listened. The nurse vented to Hardin about things she knew few would understand but her.

"We had a conversation about how hard this was for her because she had gotten attached to the patient," said



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Ann Marie Hardin, a hospital chaplain, poses for a portrait Friday in the chapel at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton.

Hardin. "And I was reminded that I do this job to try to help our nurses through these hard moments."

As one of St. Anthony's three chaplains, Hardin's job is to walk around the hospital and talk to health care workers, helping them find solace and make sense of what they witness. It's a job several health care workers say has become especially critical as they endure the pandemic's toll.

"I do think chaplains are some of the only people that nurses can talk to who do un-

derstand on at least a level what they're dealing with and what they're going through," Hardin said. "Because we're there, and we see it."

She listens in the hallways and at the nurses stations as the staff relate the stress of their jobs. She said health care workers can often be reluctant to seek help themselves, so she enjoys finding them and giving them an opportunity to talk, even if all they utter are sarcastic remarks:

"I had one girl tell me, 'It's going to suck for a while, and

then it's going to get better,'" she said. "It's an acknowledgment that we're just working through this and doing the best we can do, one patient at a time, one day at a time."

She called her job a privilege, but one that comes with responsibility.

"The notion of saying something wrong and making something worse is terrifying," she said. "But it is an incredible privilege to help bring a bit of balance and healing into their life."

She joined the hospital as an on-call chaplain in 2019. A math teacher at Blue Mountain Community College, she felt compelled to help health care workers through their day-to-day work while hearing stories from her husband, an emergency department nurse at St. Anthony. Now, she works evenings and weekends.

"I'm not somebody who likes to be bored," she said.

Throughout the pandemic, she has stood by as infection has ebbed and flowed. She has listened to health care workers whose patients improve and decline over weeks of treatment, and always in isolation, away from their families.

She told of a nurse whose patient had to go on comfort care, a stage where a nurse helps soothe a patient at the end of life. The nurse had given the last dose of medication, and she came to Hardin struggling to cope.

"She had almost felt like she had killed the patient," she said. "So I suggested to her that, rather than think of it that way, she should think of it as giving the gift of a peaceful

passing."

And over the past two months, the staff have only grown more tired and anxious, she said.

"The energy level has dropped," she said. "People are tired. They're feeling stressed, and there's a lot of worry right now because of impending staff losses and no impending decrease in patients."

The hospital, already short staffed, could lose many of its workers in the coming weeks when the state's vaccine mandate goes into effect, forcing health care workers to get the shot or lose their jobs. That impending reality has sown a new kind of division, Hardin said, between unvaccinated employees worried about finding new work and vaccinated employees fearing what work will be like without them.

The mandate comes as Umatilla County reported weekly case counts exceeding 350 for the 11th straight week, making the delta crisis the largest the county has faced by far. And a recent spike, driven partly by an outbreak linked to the Pendleton Round-Up, means the hospital could see yet another surge in patients.

"There's some uncertainty, which leads to worry and concern," Hardin said.

But for Hardin, she knows there's only one thing a chaplain can do.

"We try to pass it on to God," she said. "We're chaplains. We try to pass those things on along to that higher power that can maybe do something, or at least take that burden so that we don't have to carry it."

Oregonians will get 17% of their 2020 state income taxes back

BY **BETSY HAMMOND**
The Oregonian

Oregonians will get 17% of their 2020 Oregon income taxes back as a kicker credit when they file their 2021 taxes next year, the Oregon Department of Revenue announced Tuesday.

Revenue officials determined more than a month ago that Oregon's unique kicker rebate law would generate a jaw-dropping \$1.9 billion. But they needed to finalize and certify exactly how much each tax filer would be entitled to.

The official answer is 17.341% of 2020 state income taxes paid. Taxpayers can find their 2020 tax liability on line 22 of their 2020 Form OR.

Oregonians get a kicker rebate when the state's revenue exceeds by 2% or more what state forecasters projected far ahead of time. No other state has a similar law.

People who paid 2020 Oregon income taxes can file for and receive the credit in 2022, even if they don't owe Oregon taxes on their 2021 income.

If you owe the state money, whether for back taxes or for other items such as court fines or child support, however, the state may use all or part of your kicker that debt first.

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