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The Bulletin is launching an in-depth reporting series on the region's shortage of affordable, accessible child care, and we want your help. Share your stories about how access to child care has impacted you, and tell us more about what questions you want to see answered in future stories. Answer a few quick questions online at bendbulletin.us/childcareimpacts.

YouthBuild

Continued from A1

The child and youth development track works largely the same way, according to Tanner Rohne, the program's trainer. After an intensive, two-week orientation, students will spend eight weeks obtaining key certifications that allow them to spend the next eight months applying those skills in the classrooms of local child care providers.

"We want to give them the whole gauntlet of what the progression of youth go through from birth through 18. We know that child development never stops," Rohne said. "So we want to give them the tools needed to have an open mindset and a growth mindset to welcome learning and to push it and thrive in it."

After the first year in the program, students move into the child care workforce full time and continue to receive goal-setting support and other YouthBuild resources for the second year.

The child and youth development track takes place out of Heart of Oregon Corps' Redmond campus. Participants receive a daily stipend starting at \$26 a day, plus an AmeriCorps

educational grant of around \$1,600 at the completion of the program, Rohne said.

Around 425 students have gone through YouthBuild's construction program in Central Oregon, and 70% were employed after the program, according to Rohne.

Heart of Oregon had been considering other possible tracks — such as health care professions — for expanding the YouthBuild program, but Rohne said the community need was clearest in the child care workforce.

"We wanted to really bring in those early entry-level positions to really get kids in the door and really see how heart-filled working with children really is," Rohne said. "We feel that we have the ability to help pull on those heartstrings and really express and see the need to get qualified educators for our youth and our children."

The child and youth development track will launch at the end of January, and the nonprofit is in now accepting applications for the program. More information about applying is available online at heartoforegon.org/programs.

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COVID-19

Omicron now 73% of new U.S. cases

BY MIKE STOBBE
 Associated Press

NEW YORK — Omicron has raced ahead of other variants and is now the dominant version of the coronavirus in the U.S., accounting for 73% of new infections last week, federal health officials said Monday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention numbers showed nearly a six-fold increase in omicron's share of infections in only one week.

In much of the country, it's even higher. Omicron is responsible for an estimated 90% or more of new infections in the New York area, the Southeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific Northwest. The national rate suggests that more than 650,000 omicron infections occurred in the U.S. last week.

Since the end of June, the delta variant had been the main version causing U.S. infections. As recently as the end of November, more than 99.5% of coronaviruses were delta, according to CDC data.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said the new numbers reflect the kind of growth seen in other countries.

"These numbers are stark, but they're not surprising," she said.

Scientists in Africa first sounded the alarm about omicron less than a month ago, and on Nov. 26 the World Health Organization designated it as a "variant of concern." The mutant has since shown up in about 90 countries.

Much about the omicron variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a booster shot for the best chance at preventing omicron infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

"All of us have a date with omicron," said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "If you're going to interact with society, if you're going to have any type of life, omicron will be something you encounter, and the best way you can encounter this is to be fully vaccinated."

Adalja said he was not surprised by the CDC data showing omicron overtaking delta in the U.S., given what was seen in South Africa, the U.K. and Denmark. He predicted spread over the holidays, including breakthrough infections among the vaccinated and serious complications



Jae C. Hong/AP

Travelers wait for a shuttle at the Los Angeles International Airport on Monday. Los Angeles County's daily new cases have tripled over the past week. Over the same period, the U.S. saw hundreds of thousands of new infections as travel ramps up for the holidays.

Biden to address the nation

Four days before Christmas, President Joe Biden on Tuesday will again attempt to persuade Americans to take protections to fend off the fast-spreading omicron variant.

Biden on Tuesday will strike a more dire tone than his earlier pleas to get vaccinated, having emphasized last week that unvaccinated Americans are facing "a winter of severe illness and death." But White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that the president's speech is not "about locking the country down."

Instead, he will announce a plan to set up testing sites across the country, partly modeled on the Federal Emergency Man-

agement Agency-run vaccination sites the administration deployed during its vaccination campaign, according to people familiar with the plans who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss them. The president will also detail steps to bolster the capacity of hospitals, many of which are expected to be inundated in coming weeks.

The White House also announced Monday evening that a "mid-level staffer" had a breakthrough infection, three days after the staffer spent 30 minutes in proximity to Biden on Friday. The president tested negative on Monday and will be tested again on Wednesday, the White House said.

— The Washington Post

among the unvaccinated that could stress hospitals already burdened by delta.

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, said other countries had seen omicron's fast growth, but the U.S. data showed "a remarkable jump in such a short time."

Topol also said it's unclear how much milder omicron really is compared with other variants. "That's the big uncertainty now," he said. "We have to count on it being a lot of hospitalizations and a lot severe disease from omicron."

CDC's estimates are based on thousands of coronavirus specimens collected each week through university and commercial laboratories and state and local health departments. Scientists

analyze their genetic sequences to determine which versions of the COVID-19 viruses are most abundant.

On Monday, the CDC revised its estimate for omicron cases for the week that ended Dec. 11, after analyzing more samples. About 13% of the cases that week were from omicron, not the 3% previously reported. The week before, omicron accounted for just 0.4% of cases.

CDC officials said they do not yet have estimates of how many hospitalizations or deaths are due to omicron.

Though there remain a lot of new infections caused by the delta variant, "I anticipate that over time that delta will be crowded out by omicron," Walensky said.

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