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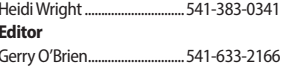
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• Home delivery and E-Edition.....\$7 per week
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LOCAL, STATE & REGION

COVID-19 data for Wednesday, Jan. 12

Deschutes County cases: 32,026 (737 new cases)
Deschutes County deaths: 224 (2 new deaths)
Crook County cases: 4,023 (53 new cases)
Crook County deaths: 62 (zero new deaths)

Jefferson County cases: 5,041 (110 new cases)
Jefferson County deaths: 70 (1 new death)
Oregon cases: 494,945 (8,760 new cases)
Oregon deaths: 5,845 (31 new deaths)
COVID-19 patients hospitalized at St. Charles Bend on Wednesday: 43 (5 in ICU).

The Bulletin had been tracking the seven-day average case count based on state data since local cases were first reported, until the state stopped providing county-level data for weekends or holidays. When data is available, The Bulletin will continue to publish information about the pandemic.

COVID-19 test shortage hits Oregon

BY TED SICKINGER
The Oregonian

The highly contagious omicron variant is running rampant nationally and setting infection records in Oregon. The supply chain – from at-home self-tests to staffing at test sites to laboratory capacity to process tests – is failing to keep up with record demand. Schools are struggling to stay open. Health care workers are struggling to get tested. Public health guidance is confusing, and sometimes conflicting. And public officials have no satisfying answers. “The reality is that widespread testing is not available,” said Julie Sullivan-Springhetti, a spokesperson for Multnomah County. “No one has

enough tests. The county has no secret stash. The reality is we have no more information than the state does.” Oregon did set testing records last week, with results reported for nearly 260,000 screenings. But state officials recognized the looming testing crush as early as two weeks ago and ordered 6 million rapid antigen test kits, with each kit containing two tests. They touted the move, saying those tests “will be offered to people around the state for free so they can find out, at home, if they are carrying the virus, and take steps to prevent its spread.” But as of Monday, the Oregon Health Authority had received only 542,970 kits, about

half the “1.1 million test kits” it initially said it was expecting by the end of last week. Nearly all of those are being distributed to hospitals, not to be people wanting to test at home. The agency did not respond to questions about what caused the apparent shortfall, nor would it say how many more kits it's expecting this week. Agency officials say they still expect to receive all test kits by early February. Whether that alleviates the wider shortages remains to be seen. Erica Heartquist, spokesperson for the agency, said 90% of the rapid antigen kits the agency has received to date will go to hospitals around the

state for front-line health care workers – an area of evident need. The agency said it is also prioritizing K-12 schools, Head Start programs and vulnerable populations that do not have ready access to testing. Heartquist acknowledged testing is not easily available, with rapid antigen tests hard to find and molecular testing, such as PCR testing, hampered not by supplies but instead by staffing challenges. Health care “staffing shortages have reduced molecular test availability,” she said in an email. “There is extremely high demand for rapid antigen tests and availability has been limited nationwide and in Oregon.”

Charles Boyle, a spokesperson for Gov. Kate Brown, said in a statement that Oregon was being impacted by the same shortages in available tests and testing supplies that all other states are experiencing. Cases in Oregon are at record levels, averaging 7,250 a day over the past week, and testing demands have increased as well. “It remains as important as ever,” he said, “for Oregonians to get vaccinated, get their booster shots, and wear masks to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19 – these actions will also help our health care workers and hospitals to ensure they have the capacity they need to continue treating patients.”



Morning traffic crosses Boone Bridge on Interstate 5 south of Portland in 2018. Pamplin Media Group, file

PORTLAND

State delays decision on tolling I-205, I-5

BY JAELEN OGADHOH
Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon Department of Transportation has temporarily postponed its decision on tolling stretches of interstates 5 and 205 in the Portland area in the next five years and will consider a request from Clackamas County for extra time to hash out regional congestion-pricing plans before tolls are implemented. Clackamas County Commissioner Paul Savas requested a delay in voting, originally scheduled for this month, on ODOT's proposal to amend the metro region's long-term transportation plan

and its required process for allocating funding to transportation projects. ODOT's delay allows the Oregon Transportation Commission time to review the county coordinating committee's proposal to develop a comprehensive plan for answering “critical systemwide questions” regarding traffic diversion mitigation and funding decisions before bringing proposed amendments to an official vote. County staff will return with updates from ODOT and recommendations for next steps at a future session before ODOT's proposed amendments are brought to a vote.

State reports \$24M in unemployment fraud in 2020

Final number will likely be higher, but it is much lower than other states have tallied

BY MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

The Oregon Employment Department says it has identified just over \$24 million in fraudulent jobless claims paid in 2020. That's according to a new report from the agency, its first public attempt at tallying fraud losses during the first months of the pandemic. That total includes only fraud the department has specifically identified. The agency acknowledges total fraud losses were assuredly higher, though how much higher is unclear. The state hasn't tallied 2021 losses yet. Still, the employment department says Oregon's losses appear to have been a tiny fraction of fraud reported in some other states, which estimate their own unemployment fraud losses in the billions or tens of billions of dollars. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates total unemployment fraud losses at more than \$50 billion across the 50 states. “It appears that Oregon, the amount of fraud that Oregon experienced, was less than what occurred in many other states,” said Sara Cromwell, the department's deputy director for benefits. That's partly because of measures the employment department took to identify and stop fraud, she said, and partly because the same antiquated computer systems that delayed payments to legitimately un-

employed Oregonians also slowed payments to online thieves. That gave Oregon more time to identify their schemes. Nearly two years into the pandemic, though, Oregon says it still cannot estimate its total fraud losses during 2020. The state, like the rest of the nation, was experiencing record unemployment in the early months of the pandemic, and Oregon's employment department says it's been unable to come up with a reliable figure. “Because the volumes and the methods of ID theft and attacks were unprecedented, we don't have a baseline we can use to forecast what the ultimate number will be,” Cromwell said. “We have made efforts to gauge that,” she said, “but efforts need to be validated before we can go public with (fraud) rates.” Unemployment fraud soared during the pandemic as thieves around the country and around the globe sought to cash in on new federal benefits programs that provided an enormous infusion of aid to people laid off as a result of COVID-19. States struggled to keep up with demand from jobless workers, let alone monitor claims for identity theft and other fraudulent schemes. Until this month's report, Oregon had refused to provide any data about possible

fraud losses. The employment department, which has an unusual and broad exemption from state public records law, said it feared that releasing any information about its fraud losses could invite online thieves to target the state. The new report contains only basic information, which the department said would be of no use to thieves. It tallies \$24 million in suspected or proven fraud, the vast majority perpetrated by individuals. It has identified \$3 million in losses connected to identity theft, the kind of fraud that online gangs used to steal the most money in other states.

Oregon has recovered more than \$1 million in fraudulent payments from 2020, according to the employment department. The agency said four people have been convicted in unemployment fraud cases since the start of 2020, and three more cases are pending. The employment department says it has identified 19 other cases of suspected fraud it expects to refer for future prosecution and is working to find more. On Tuesday, employment department Director David Gerstenfeld stood by his decision to delay reporting of

fraud losses until now. He said some benefits programs, notably Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, faced nearly continuous attacks until that program for self-employed workers expired last year. Anything the department said earlier about how it was responding to fraud risked inviting unwelcome attention from gangs of cybercriminals, Gerstenfeld said. “The amount of risk of it tipping someone off may not be huge, but the consequences of that risk if it were to come true, as we have seen in some other states, can be massive,” he said.

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