

Balancing patient privacy and public safety

EOC plans to request people who test positive for COVID-19 sign waivers to allow release of information to dispatch and law enforcement

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant County Health Department plans to ask those who test positive for the new coronavirus to voluntarily share that information with the Emergency Operations Center and the local dispatch so both agencies can track the person and — if law enforcement or first responders are called out to the individual's residence — warn them to take precautions to keep from contracting the virus.

Law enforcement and first responders, essential jobs critical to the infrastructure of a community during a crisis or disaster, are at a high risk of exposure and spread of the virus, said County Commissioner Sam Palmer, the public information officer for the county's coronavirus response.

Palmer said, in a rural area with limited resources, the community must be proactive about protecting law enforcement and first responders.

A dispatcher's questions could mean the difference between identifying a case in advance or getting a first responder infected, he said. The dispatch screening guidelines are supposed to be based on the state health authority guidelines.

"Oregon Health Authority is asking that people let first responders know that they are positive for COVID-19 if they know that information and are able to provide it when contacting first responders," said Lauren Wirtis, public information officer for the state's COVID-19 Joint Information Center.

Valerie Maynard, Grant County Emergency Communications Agency director, said these concerns about privacy and public health came up in the 1980s and 1990s with HIV.

Maynard said, while she would follow the health department's lead on whether or not to flag the residence of someone who tested positive for the virus, she still wants to run it by legal counsel.



Contributed photo

Law enforcement and first responders meet at the Emergency Operations Center.

Maynard said there are precautions for various other diseases law enforcement and first responders should be taking when they go out on calls as well.

Grant County Health Department Director Kimberly Lindsay said she understands the reason why law enforcement and emergency workers would want to know ahead of time.

"The health department is here to support our law enforcement and first responders," Lindsay said.

"These are unprecedented times."

However, the 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act ensures that a person's health records remain undisclosed to the general public even after someone's death. Thus, releasing the name of a person who contracted COVID-19 without a signed release would violate HIPAA.

Palmer said those in the medical field, such as doctors, nurses, and medi-

cal assistants, go through training on complying with HIPAA. Because the EOC staff are not in the medical field, they will not go through HIPAA training, he said.

Palmer said, in lieu of HIPAA training, they have all signed documents stating that if they were to share protected patient information they would go to jail.

"Anyone who shares patient health information would go to jail," Palmer said.

Palmer said he has sent a

proposal to state Rep. Mark Owens and Sen. Lynn Findley to take to the governor that would allow him to share confirmed COVID-19 cases with the EOC and dispatch without a signed release.

Palmer said, with limited personal protective equipment and limited law enforcement, the county does not have backup resources.

"If you lose your quarterback, you have no team," he said.

Cities in Grant County declaring a state of emergency

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Cities in Grant County are beginning to declare a state of emergency as cases of COVID-19 continue to rise in Oregon.

John Day, Prairie City, Monument, Mt. Vernon and Canyon City have declared a state of emergency in preparation for the uncertain future of COVID-19 in Grant County.

Prairie City Mayor Jim Hamsher said that Prairie City's declaration helps promote proactive actions taken to protect the health and businesses of people in the city. Hamsher added that the declaration will also help by giving flexibility and the ability to make split-second decisions if needed or fill a public work position in case a staff member is sick or unavailable.

Mt. Vernon City Recorder Tami Kowling said that the declaration will give protection for businesses by providing them with an opportunity for federal funding. Along with the declaration, Mt. Vernon City Hall is now closed to the public, but payments can be made by drop box, mail or by phone. The city also decided to close their park.

Canyon City Mayor Steve Fischer said that the statewide order from Gov. Kate Brown put a halt to everything they had already planned to stop with the declaration such as non-essential businesses.

"It does open us up so we can get some recovery if we have to incur any cost from COVID-19 through the state and federal government, and that's what a lot of it is about," Fischer said.

Fischer talked to Cory Rider, the city recorder, and asked him if he would feel better if Canyon City City Hall were closed. Rider told Fischer there are few people

that come in and nobody has come in unhealthy, so he is fine with city hall remaining open.

Monument declared a state of emergency on March 23.

"This is just a formality. The city needs to publicly declare a state of emergency to ensure the city can run at its entirety during this pandemic," the city of Monument posted on their Facebook page to let community members know about the decision.

The cities of Seneca, Dayville and Long Creek have not declared a state of emergency, but they are well aware of the situation and are focused on the safety of the people in their communities.

Seneca has closed their city office as of March 24 to walk-in traffic, but payments and documents can be submitted through the drop box on the west side of the building.

"The regular council meeting and public hearings for ordinances 98, 99 and 100 scheduled for April 14th have been cancelled," said Seneca City Manager Raamin Burrell.

"Notices will be reposted when the public hearings are rescheduled. Seneca is calling for any and all volunteers to help assist residents with supply runs. Please contact the City Office for information, 541-542-2161. Notices will be posted in Seneca."

Dayville Mayor Ilah Bennett said that the city lawyer contacted them and said the city has the ability to declare a state of emergency but at the moment the city is doing well.

"As of right now, we are doing good," Bennett said. "Everybody is conforming and doing what they need to do, and we're fine and life is still carrying on the way it needs to with what restrictions we've got."



Eagle file photo

Grant County Undersheriff Zach Mobley, left, and Deputy Dave Dobler, incident commander of the county's coronavirus response, address the Grant County Court.

Emergency Operations Center training neighborhood watch

Volunteers will drive private, unmarked cars but wear identifying vests

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County coronavirus response incident commander Dave Dobler said the emergency operations center would begin training 11-15 volunteers this week to be on a neighborhood watch program in significant areas in the county.

"They won't be a posse or a renegade," Dobler said. "They will be another set of eyes and ears in the county."

Dobler said the EOC is responding to concerns in the community about

the possibility of crime increasing during the public health crisis.

"People are worried about looters and sort of 'Mad Max' environment," Dobler said.

Dobler said, while he does not foresee a post-apocalyptic scenario, he still believes communities that take a proactive approach see less crime.

Dobler said it is the "Broken Windows Theory," a theory of policing that, once disorder begins in the neighborhood, things can quickly get out of control, leading to more crime.

County Commissioner Sam Palmer, the public information officer for the county's coronavirus response, said Grant County is a small community with limited resources.

"We have one grocery store, one gas station and one pharmacy," Palmer said. "And if the situation continues to go on, pretty soon people will be coming in from somewhere else."

Dobler said the group of volunteers will go through specific training online. They will be given radios,

and if they see something, they will report it to incident command, who will report it to the sheriff's office.

Dobler said they will drive private, unmarked cars, but they will wear identifying vests.

He said background checks will be completed, and they will sign volunteer agreements.

Dobler declined to provide the names of the volunteers. The Eagle has submitted a public records request.

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