

Oregon attorney general: Watch out for coronavirus scams

By Dick Hughes
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Scammers, fraudsters and price gougers are preying on Oregonians, capitalizing on their concerns about coronavirus.

"There are no known cures or vaccines — yet — for COVID-19. So anyone trying to sell you one is lying," Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum said. "And as for any money that you may eventually get from the federal government, and we hope you will, please be careful because scammers are already scheming on how to intercept all or some of that money."

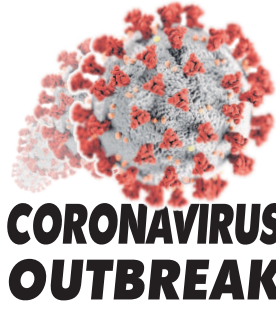
Rosenblum and Gov. Kate Brown spoke during a conference call this week with Oregon members of AARP, which had received more than 500 calls on its price-gouging hotline. "Exploiting the public's fear for

profit will not be tolerated," Rosenblum said.

Brown this week extended her executive order declaring an abnormal market disruption due to COVID-19. The order authorizes legal action against wholesalers and merchants who provide "essential consumer goods or services for an amount that represents an unconscionably excessive price," such as at least 15% above the normal price.

Rosenblum said the only other time she could recall the regulation being invoked was during Salem's water crisis two years ago, when some sellers jacked up prices for bottled water.

Responding to the current price



gouging, the Oregon Department of Justice has sent more than 20 cease-and-desist letters to businesses, ordering them to reduce their prices on toilet paper, hand sanitizer, face masks or other essentials. Rosenblum said most businesses complied after learning price gouging was illegal.

Other current scams involve the stimulus payments headed to Americans as part of the federal government's coronavirus response. Distribution through direct deposit or mailed checks could begin next week.

The official term is "economic impact payment," but state and federal tax officials warn that scammers will emphasize such words as "stimu-

lus check" or "stimulus payment."

Rosenblum noted that Oregonians do not need to pay anything upfront or give out personal information to receive the payments, despite what scammers might claim.

"The government's not going to contact you to ask you for your Social Security number or your bank account or your credit card number to confirm your identity. So people who ask for this type of information are scammers," she said. "And if they say they're from the government, they're what are known as imposter scammers. They're pretending to be from the government. But they're not. They're scammers."

Most government communications with Oregonians are through mail, although even some of those could be fake demands for money. Rosenblum urged people to take con-

rol by looking up the phone numbers or websites of government agencies and contacting them directly when in doubt or suspicious of a scam.

Imposter scams already were the second-most-frequent consumer complaint to the Department of Justice last year. Telecommunications topped the list, and the attorney general predicted a surge of pandemic-related illegal robocalls.

"You're going to start hearing that voice, whether it's Rachel from Credit Card Services or Joe, you know, from Coronavirus Central," Rosenblum said.

As for people selling miracle cures or supposed coronavirus test kits, Rosenblum said, "Ask yourself, if there'd been a medical breakthrough, would you be hearing it for the first time through an ad or a sales pitch?"

Oregon school buildings to remain closed through academic year

By Dick Hughes
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon school buildings are closed for the rest of the academic year.

Schooling will continue through online courses, video chats and other forms of distance learning. Seniors who were on track to graduate before the state initially closed schools last month will receive passing grades and are assured of graduation.

Gov. Kate Brown made the announcements April 8.

"It is impossible to adhere to social distancing measures in our classrooms and in our schools," she said. She added that Oregon's education workforce is typically older and potentially more vulnerable to COVID-19.

"Every state in the country is struggling with these decisions," she said. "I know this is certainly not what any of us were hoping for, but it is truly the best decision for our

system."

The Oregon Education Association, which is the state's largest teacher union, and the Oregon School Boards Association praised Brown's decision, which had been expected. Districts are to continue paying employees.

During the press conference, Brown said she had no timeline for reopening closed businesses or relaxing other social distancing measures. She also said schools should hold off on hiring new employees envisioned through last year's Student Success Act and its new tax on businesses.

Brown called on the state's 197 school districts to focus on seniors who were not meeting graduation requirements when schools closed. Districts are to create personalized graduation and transition plans for each senior and help them proceed with college, job training, military service or other goals.

Colt Gill, who heads the



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz
Red cups in a fence at Grant Union Junior-Senior High School deliver the message, 'We miss you.'

state Department of Education, said this approach frees up seniors' teachers, school counselors and administrators to ensure they seek out every student who was failing a required course and help them earn the needed graduation credits.

If seniors have met the graduation threshold and do not need continued study, their schooling might be done. Their version of distance learning is up to them

and their district. "If districts want to keep seniors fully engaged in coursework, they can," Marc Siegel, the department's communications director, said later.

Colt said it's up to individual districts to decide whether to extend school into the summer. Some might also choose to start the 2020-21 school year early. Seniors have until Aug. 31 to complete graduation requirements for the class of 2020 through a variety of

means.

Sports and other state championships are canceled. Districts are encouraged to create alternatives to in-person proms, senior trips, commencement and other milestone events, or to reschedule them when social distancing can be lifted.

"Think of creative ways to celebrate this class," Gill said. "This is a class that we know are developing a lot of resilience right now, and we believe they're ready for their next steps in life."

Last week, the Department of Education instructed districts to contact students, ensure they were physically safe and healthy, address any behavioral health issues and then deal with learning. Next week, districts are to provide instruction in earnest.

"This does look different across the entire state," Gill said Wednesday. "I want to be clear that distance learning is not synonymous with online

learning, although it is online learning in some cases."

Examples he gave included teachers working with a group of students through a video or audio conference, having one-on-one calls with students and posting a YouTube video of a teaching session.

"We have places in Eastern Oregon where they don't have great internet connections where our school buses are delivering learning packets to students, and they're bringing those back to the teachers and getting evaluative feedback on those," Gill said.

Oregon's recommendations mirror those in Washington, California, Kansas, Utah and other states, he said. The Department of Education has posted resources for educators and families, including a sample daily schedule for distance learning.

"It's a heavy lift. It's a heavy lift for the educators. It's a heavy lift for our parents, as well," Gill said.

Panel of medical professionals advising Brown on Oregon's coronavirus response

By Dick Hughes
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown has created an eight-member panel of medical professionals to advise her on the state's coronavirus response.

The committee, which includes Bend pulmonologist Louis D'Avignon, convened via videoconference

for the first time on April 7. Members are to meet twice weekly to review Oregon's testing capacity, hospital capacity, acquisition of personal protective equipment and effectiveness of social distancing measures.

Brown also extended indefinitely her mandate that bars, restaurants and other eateries serve only

takeout or delivery items, with no on-site consumption allowed. That executive order had been scheduled to end on April 14.

In a telephone conference call with Oregon members of AARP, Brown reiterated that social distancing has helped "flatten the curve" — slowing the rate of new cases of COVID-19 so as not to over-

whelm the state's health care system.

"While we know what we're doing is working, we have to embrace the reality that unfortunately Oregon may see an increase in cases in the coming days and weeks," Brown said.

Brown and Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, who joined in the conference call, emphasized that there is no coronavirus vaccine or miracle cure, despite what scammers may claim.

"The only thing we know that works is social distancing" to reduce the likelihood of transmission, Brown said.

Earlier April 7, the state's top emergency management official encouraged Oregonians to enjoy the nice weather but stay close to home and



Gov. Kate Brown

and windows to let the fresh air in, but not participate in group sports or large gatherings.

Phelps said it was too early to tell when Oregon might ease rules on social distancing and restrictions on business operations.

"We're not going to know when we're out of the woods until we're out of the woods," he said.

Phelps also announced that Oregon would receive 78 pallets of personal protective equipment on Wednesday from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Although he did not have specific numbers, Phelps said the shipment would include tens of thousands of masks, gloves and other protective gear, which the state would distribute to counties and tribes.

APRIL IS SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS MONTH

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