

Oregon hits new record in COVID-19 infections

By Gary A. Warner

For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon reported a new record for COVID-19 infections on Thursday as health officials cautioned the phased “reopening” of the state depended on residents not returning to pre-pandemic patterns.

“I am nervous that people think moving into Phase 1 or Phase 2 is going back to the way things were,” Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

The state reported 178 new positive cases of the virus on Thursday, surpassing the previous one-day record of 146 cases set on Sunday. Oregon has reported 5,237 cases since March.

Two more people died, bringing the total to 171. The fatalities were identified as a Clackamas County

woman, 84, and a Yamhill County man, 66.

The majority of new cases were in Clackamas (47), Multnomah (43), Marion (34) and Washington (15) counties.

The other cases were in Lincoln (9), Yamhill (6), Umatilla (4), Polk (4), Jefferson (3), Lane (3), Crook (2) and Lake (2) counties. Deschutes, Clatsop, Hood River, Union, Wallowa and Wasco counties each reported one case.

Allen said the state expected the numbers to rise as the emergency restrictions put in place in late March to slow the spread of the highly contagious virus are being partially lifted.

“The question has always been, can we manage that in a way that doesn’t prevent the cases from going up but prevents it from overwhelming our systems,” he said.

Phase 1 reopening, allowing some restaurants and other businesses to reopen, was approved for 31 of the state’s 36 counties in mid-May.

On June 5, the state said 29 counties could move into Phase 2, which allowed for larger crowds, more travel and opening of theaters, bowling alleys and the return of some workers to their offices. Allen credited an increase in testing and tracing the contacts of those with infections with part of the increase in numbers.

“Much of the testing going on is focused on higher risk areas, like long-term care and high density work environments,” he said.

Allen said workplace outbreaks, such as Pacific Seafood Co. in Newport, have caused the numbers to rise.

The Centers for Disease Control reported Thursday that there have been 2 million cases in the United States, with 113,000 deaths.

While much of Oregon has moved into Phase 2, nearly half of Oregon’s 4.3 million people live in counties that are lagging behind.

Multnomah County, which includes Portland, is the only county that has not started the reopening process. It has applied to go into Phase 1, and if approved would start Friday. Marion, Washington, Clackamas, Hood River, Lincoln and Polk counties are still under Phase 1.

Allen said, so far, the mass “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations in Portland and smaller marches in other Oregon cities have not shown an increase in infection rates. Allen said health officials would continue to monitor the numbers as people who are infected with COVID-19 can go two weeks before experiencing symptoms such as fever and shortness of breath.

Allen said there were three scenarios going forward:

- If the growth in infections remains under 10%, the number of daily new cases would remain around 100, a manageable total for the health care system. The reopening process could continue to move forward.

- A rate of up to 20% would mean infections could rise as high as 270 per day by July. The state and counties would have to review why the numbers are up and take action to bring the growth down.

- If the numbers rise by more than 30%, Allen said health officials worry about an uncontrollable growth in the virus that could overwhelm the health care system, especially hospitals. Reopening measures would have to be curtailed or reversed.

“We don’t see evidence of that kind of trend emerging,” Allen said.

State releases guidelines for reopening schools in fall

By Jackson Hogan
Oregon Capital Bureau

This fall, Oregon’s K-12 students may finally get to return to their classrooms for the first time in half a year, based on new state safety guidelines. But school won’t look the same as it did before COVID-19.

New behaviors and rituals will need to be learned. Desks will be 6 feet apart. Face coverings will be required for most school staff. Elementary students won’t share glue sticks.

“There is no doubt this spring was hard on students, families, and educators,” said a statement signed by state education and health directors Colt Gill and Pat Allen. “And yet, we believe returning to school, the planning it will require, and the shifts in adult and student behavior it will require will be even more difficult.”

Much of the state’s long list of reopening requirements and recommendations fall under a few ideals: Keep students and staff at a distance from each other, wipe down and sanitize objects frequently and make sure everyone washes their hands as often as possible.

Schools will be required to keep students in isolated groups, or cohorts, whenever possible. Cohorts must allow for at least 35 square feet per person, including staff, and they’ll be assigned certain spaces only for their use. That includes bathrooms as well as classrooms, according to the state.

The state guidelines admit keeping students in rigid cohorts is harder in middle and high schools — where students see multiple teachers in a day — but the state still recommends that all schools make plans to reduce mixing student cohorts.

School schedules will also be modified to keep as few students in hallways and shared spaces as possible.

Furthermore, just about every object in schools that students touch, from desks to school bus seats to library books, should be sanitized frequently, according to the state.

Face masks and coverings will be required for all staff who are regularly within 6 feet of other people in school, bus drivers, staff who prepare or serve meals and school visitors. Front office staff will be required to wear larger, plastic face shields, or be behind a plastic barrier.

Students will not be required to wear face masks



EO Media Group file photo
Cohen Montoya, right, looks over Brett Ross' iPad while working on a project in a computer science class at Cascade Middle School in Bend in 2019.

— although it is recommended, particularly for middle and high school students, who will have to mix with other students more often — and schools must continue to educate students who don’t wear masks.

Frequent hand washing will be recommended for students and staff, and required before eating meals. Elementary students will be required to wash their hands before and after using playground equipment.

Before walking into a school building or school bus, each student and staff member must be screened for COVID-19 symptoms. This can be done with a parent or guardian’s confirmation, or through a visual check.

Every school district and private school will need to fill out a state form, a blueprint for reopening with checklists of requirements to keep students and staff safe.

If a school district chooses to stick with temporary distance learning, or a hybrid of in-school and distance learning, the district must describe how that will look for its students and staff. Districts must also have plans in place in case of a local spike of COVID-19 cases.

Districts receiving federal grants for disadvantaged students must also consult with local tribal agencies before sending in completed checklists. School districts should also meet with students, families and other community groups to shape their individual plan, the state recommended.

Then, school districts’ re-entry forms must be approved by a series of groups, in this order: the local school board, the local public health agency and the Oregon Department of Education. These blueprints for re-entry must also be posted to school district and school websites for the public to see.



EO Media Group file photo
Oregon State University-Cascades students walk around the campus in Bend in 2017.

Big changes anticipated when colleges, universities open this fall

Teresa Carson
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

College life will look a lot different when students return to school in the fall, with students being asked to stay 6 feet apart and many traditional campus activities off limits.

“The guidelines make it very clear” that campus life will indeed be different this fall, Ben Cannon, executive director of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, said.

College classrooms have to follow general pandemic capacity guidelines for their locations. That means no more than 25 people in a room for counties in the Phase 1 opening category and no more than 50 people for all other counties. Colleges must rearrange classrooms to allow 6 feet of social distancing and 35 square feet per person of space.

That’s going to make the big lecture classes with hundreds of students crammed together off limits for the duration of the pandemic. Stadiums filled with screaming football or basketball fans are out. Arts performances will have to be rejiggered.

If 6 feet of distancing isn’t possible, plastic or other barriers are to be used and face masks required. Face coverings are recommended even for spaces where distancing is achieved.

The guidelines, issued Friday by the commission,

were crafted with the Oregon Health Authority and apply to all public colleges including community colleges and are effective June 14. They are designed to help tamp down the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which already has killed more than 170 Oregonians.

Cannon said “each college and university will have the flexibility to determine when students may return to campus.”

Colleges, like K-12 schools, have been teaching students via distance learning since March. That pivot “required a quick and extraordinary transformation,” Cannon noted.

Colleges are digesting the new rules and those in Multnomah County are waiting for information on when the county will start Phase 1 opening.

The new guidelines said that, for colleges with residential students, dorm rooms can’t have more than two students and must allow 64 square feet per resident.

Cannon said that most typical double dorm rooms would still be able to accommodate two students, but most triples would probably have to be reduced to two residents.

“We don’t know yet what residence hall interest levels will be,” he said.

The guidelines said that in learning situations “with higher risk of spread, such as

laboratories, computer labs, music/performance classes, studios, and locker rooms, (colleges must) implement enhanced measures such as greater physical distancing, physical barriers (e.g. clear plastic), increased fresh air ventilation, moving outdoors, and enhanced cleaning measures as feasible.”

There are detailed requirements for students in health care professions or other hands-on career and technical education classes.

Local community groups will continue to be locked out of college campuses. College classrooms, theaters, athletic facilities, art galleries and other spaces are frequently used for public gatherings, but the guidelines say college spaces can “be open only for official college or university business.” There are exceptions if no other venues are available and groups can adhere to coronavirus safety requirements.

Cannon admitted this rule “will inhibit some of the community activities” that happen on campuses across the state.

Much of the guidelines are standard pandemic protocol, advising frequent hand washing, not allowing people to come to work or class if they are ill and requiring

them to self-isolate if they know they’ve been exposed to COVID-19. The colleges will have to provide space for students to isolate if the need arises. Colleges must have a communicable disease plan in case COVID-19 flares up on campus.

Institutions are required to clean and disinfect daily in places where there is activity.

The guidelines are similar to but much less detailed than those for K-12 schools issued by the Oregon Department of Education issued on June 10.

Colleges must also have a written plan to show how the school is meeting the guidelines and should post it on its web page, the guidelines said.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown is expected to issue an executive order soon on higher education and COVID-19, replacing the earlier one that was effective through June 13.

Brown said in a statement: “Each institution, each campus, and each building is different, and it’s critical that the implementation of this public health guidance be informed by direct community feedback. But with safeguards in place, Oregon’s great colleges and universities can return to fulfilling their missions in pursuit of learning, research, and achievement.”

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