

County congregate care centers report no COVID-19

Facilities taking extra precautions

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Congregate living facilities continue to be hotspots of COVID-19 transmission in Oregon, but Grant County has been spared so far.

A New York Times analysis of pandemic cases and deaths shows that Oregon is one of 13 states where more than half the total deaths from COVID-19 have been nursing and other congregate care facility residents.

In Grant County, where the Census Bureau reports 36.5% of the population is 65 and older, county officials have been steadfast in preventing the virus from spreading to its long-term care centers.

Valley View Assisted Living Executive Director Stephanie Rodriguez said the facility had recently started allowing limited indoor family visits less than a week before the county saw a surge in positive cases last month that shut down the visits.

“It was unfortunate because we did try (limited visits) with two different families, and it worked out well, but then cases started to spike,” she said.

Rodriguez said the facility has not experienced a single case since the start of the pandemic.

Amid the surge in infections in John Day, she said, the likelihood of the virus making its way into the facility is high. She attributes Valley View’s success in keeping the virus out of the facility to the vigilance of her staff.

“The only way that my residents would get it is if my staff members brought it in to them,” Rodriguez said.

She said the staff has done a “wonderful job” of making sure Valley View stays clean and sanitized. Moreover, she said, they have been mindful both outside and inside of the building.

Rodriguez said, since early spring, they have essentially limited visits to hospice, home



People Mover driver Frank Bingham visits with a Valley View Assisted Living resident in April. Eagle file photo

health and essential care for families.

Rodriguez said the facility is testing staff weekly. She said they had considered ramping up testing to twice a week, but given the state’s change to how it accounts for the number of tests administered, she said it is more appropriate to test weekly.

Earlier this year, she said, allergy season was rough as several of her staff have bad allergies and were unsure of what to do when they noticed their allergies started to act up.

“We just watch them closely and make sure they’re wearing their proper PPE,” she said. “And all of their tests were negative.”

She said it is a “little bit of a struggle” for the residents regarding the toll the lockdowns have on the residents’ mental health.

“You know, Skype and phone calls are not the same as touching and hugging your loved one,” she said. “And watching your family through a window is not very fun.”

Rodriguez said window visits are no longer an option because of the weather. Nonetheless, she told the Eagle her

activities director brings in her iPad, and several of the residents have weekly visits with their family via Skype.

According to research out of Yale School of Public Health aimed at learning how families meaningfully communicated early in the pandemic, video conferencing and other real-time types of technology were associated with positive emotions as were familiar types, such as simple phone calls.

Dr. Joan Monin said, while the survey was “very preliminary,” she is finding in her own research how families have adapted and have been grateful to be in on Zoom meetings.

“I think with more familiarity we might want to track over time to see if there’s added benefits of really having that facial feedback in communication like we’re used to when it’s not possible to do that in person,” she said.

Monin said this could have implications beyond the pandemic because there are a lot of people who live far away from their loved ones.

“I think the more people stay connected on the phone, the more positive experiences people are having from day to day,” she said.

Rodriguez said, while residents are free to go and come as they please, Valley View staff conduct risk assessments based on the activity and quarantine those who

might have risked exposure to the virus.

“I’m hoping any kind of sicknesses can be avoided right now,” she said. “Our precautions are so extreme right now with all the sanitation and staff wearing masks and the residents keeping their distance from one another and basically isolating from one another.”

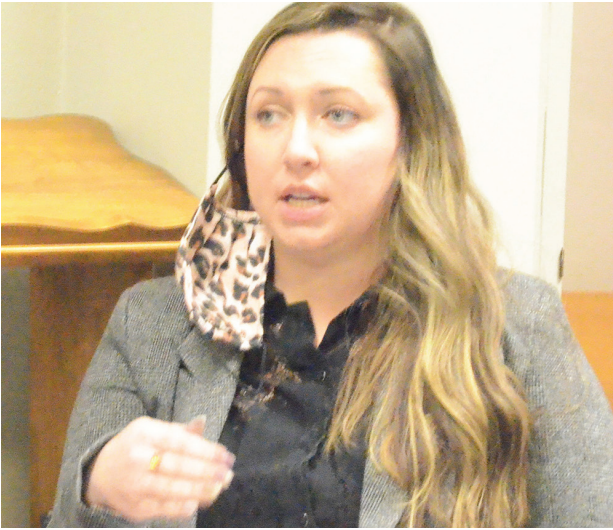
Like Valley View, Blue Mountain Hospital District’s Director of Emergency Medical Services Rebekah Rand said Blue Mountain Care Center in Prairie City limits visits to compassionate care or end of life only.

Rand said the care center has suspended communal activities, including sharing meals with other residents.

She said the district has “enhanced” and ramped up its sanitation standards at the facility, and residents, when not in their room, are required to wear a mask. Additionally, she said, the district encourages residents to stay in their room for their safety.

She said the district bases how frequently they test on the county’s positivity rate at the direction of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

“Counties with infection rates up to 5% mandate once-monthly testing of all staff,” Rand said. “CMS requires the counties exceeding the 5% threshold to test weekly.”



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell
Tory Stinnett, Grant County economic development director, addresses county court during its emergency meeting Dec. 2.

Grant County Court approves \$564,000 in CARES Act relief funds for small businesses

Deadline to apply is Dec. 13

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County Court members unanimously approved using \$564,000 in state Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funds to help the county’s small businesses, especially restaurants and bars, weather the economic fallout caused by the pandemic.

Grant County Economic Development Director Tory Stinnett said businesses have until Dec. 13 to apply for grants starting at \$10,000 for sole proprietors with five full-time employees.

Businesses with six to 15 full-time employees are eligible to receive \$20,000, and those with 16 to 25 employees can get \$30,000.

Stinnett said eligible businesses must have experienced economic hardship related to the coronavirus between March 1 and Nov. 30 of this year and be able to document the losses on a profit and loss sheet.

Additionally, businesses must self-certify their 2019 taxes and have them filed by July 15.

Only businesses with headquarters in Oregon are eligible and, if applicable, must be registered with the Secretary of State. Compa-

nies must be for-profit or nonprofits with appropriate documentation from the Internal Revenue Service.

Business owners must apply online through Community Lending Works, Stinnett said.

She said the most significant difference with the application process for this round of grants is they cannot submit hard-copy applications. Stinnett said those without access to a computer or who need assistance could schedule an appointment by calling 541-575-1555 or emailing tstinnett@grantcountyoregon.net.

The Grant County Economic Development Office, located at the L building on Main Street in John Day, is open for appointments.

The office follows COVID-19 safety guidelines. Stinnett said she could provide a mask if someone needs one.

Additionally, Stephanie Lequieu, Oregon RAIN catalyst, is available to help with applications as well. Her email is stephanie@oregonrain.org.

Stinnett said the county’s window to get the money out to businesses is small.

“These funds were allocated with short notice by the governor,” she said.

With a report of how the county spent the money due Jan. 5, Stinnett said it is crucial businesses start the process soon.

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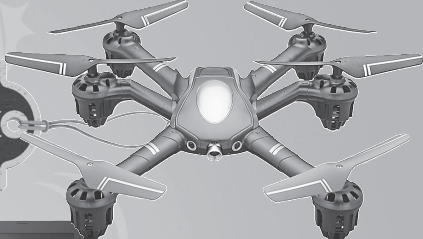
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