

Brown orders vaccine redirected to Portland

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown on Jan. 27 ordered 32,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines redirected to the Portland area instead of going to other parts of the state.

The move came after news reports that health care workers in Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties were unable to be vaccinated because of a shortage of doses.

At the same time, other counties were inoculating groups further down the priority list because of excess doses on hand.

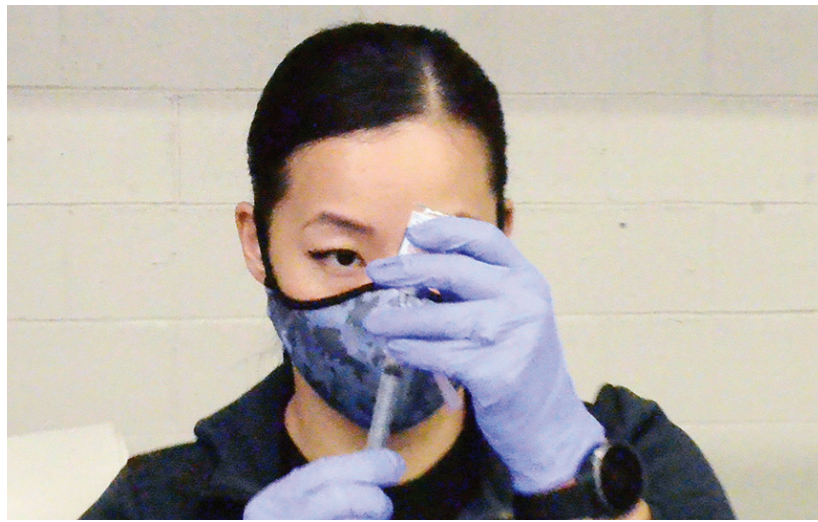
“Health care workers and Phase 1a individuals across the state have always been my top priority for vaccination,” Brown said.

The Portland area would receive 17,000 additional shots for health care workers and 15,000 for teachers and school staff.

“That’s currently about 60% of the 53,000 first doses to be sent around the state next week, reflecting the large number of health care workers and individuals from vulnerable populations in the region,” Brown said.

Brown did not say where the doses would come from, but her office provided a list of 15 counties that are ahead of schedule on inoculating priority groups. Some of the doses will be from a new shipment authorized by the Centers for Disease Control.

The diversion was announced soon after news reports that Deschutes



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Rebekah Rand, director of emergency management services at Blue Mountain Hospital District, gets a vaccine shot ready Jan. 15 at the Grant County Fairgrounds pavilion.

County and others were inoculating senior citizens 75 year old and up. Under the current guidelines, those groups were to receive shots as late as Feb. 14.

The reason that the 15 counties are ahead of schedule was not mentioned in Brown’s statement or information from OHA.

Grant County has moved down the list because of an unexpectedly high rate of eligible people declining to be vaccinated.

Brown has made inoculating teachers and school staff a higher priority than vaccinations for those aged 65 and above

who are most likely to get seriously ill and die from the virus.

Oregon is the only state giving priority to teachers over seniors.

Brown praised counties that had moved more swiftly than expected through the early priority groups.

“Other counties have done a fantastic job and have finished their first round of vaccines for Phase 1a populations,” Brown said.

But she said the state’s priority is to get all counties through the Phase 1a group before a widespread move into lower priority groups.

“We will push to give first doses to

all Phase 1a individuals statewide before Feb. 8,” she said.

The state will send second doses to the counties ahead of schedule so they can keep on a timeline for those who have already received their first shots.

In a related development, the Oregon Health Authority said it would stop issuing specific information about COVID-19 deaths in Oregon. Since March 2020, OHA has included the age, home county, place of death, the date of infection, the date of death and the existence of any underlying conditions.

Statistics on overall deaths will be maintained, but specific case information will no longer be made public.

OHA said the compilation of the daily death toll information was stretching staff too thin.

Critics and the media questioned the timing of the change, coming amid a debate over Brown’s decision to prioritize teachers over the elderly. The daily reports showed that the deaths are overwhelmingly in the 70 and above age range. It also comes the day before the Oregon COVID-19 vaccination committee is expected to issue ongoing prioritization for vaccines. As of Jan. 26, the committee was discussing whether minority communities that have seen higher infection rates and deaths should be specifically targeted.

Other panel members have advocated to next move on to people with medical conditions that make them vulnerable to severe illness or death from COVID-19.

Gyms can partially reopen under new COVID-19 rule

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gyms can reopen under tight guidelines to control COVID-19 infections, Gov. Kate Brown announced Jan. 26.

The new rules for “indoor recreation” were included in an update of county risk levels.

There was little movement among counties from their risk levels two weeks ago. Nearly all of the state’s most populous counties were among the 26 that remained in the extreme risk category.

Under the four-tier risk ratings, counties are assigned a level based on COVID-19 spread: lower, moderate, high or extreme. As the levels go up, more health and safety measures, along with business and activity restrictions, are required.

Tillamook County was the big mover, dropping from extreme risk all the way to lower risk. Curry County went from moderate to lower. Grant rose from lower to moderate risk. All other counties remained in the current status.

The levels will be in place from Friday through Feb. 11, with the next revision announced Feb. 9.

Brown said the state will issue new guidelines allowing for indoor activities that were previously banned in extreme risk counties.

Beginning Friday, a maximum of six people can be indoors at facilities such as gyms that are over 500 square feet. The new rules do not include indoor dining.

Facilities smaller than 500 square feet allow for one-to-one customer experiences, such as personal training.

All facilities must follow guidelines on social distancing, face coverings, hygiene and cleaning of surfaces. The full updated guidance has been posted to coronavirus.oregon.gov.

Brown encouraged people to exercise outdoors whenever possible.

“The science has shown us that outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities when it comes to the spread of COVID 19,” she said.

But a recent drop in infection rates and the lack of a major “spike” in COVID-19 cases over the winter holidays allowed for some limited indoor activity during the colder winter months.

“We have seen over the last several weeks that Oregonians have largely complied with risk levels to the point that we have not seen a surge in hospitalizations that would have jeopardized hospital capacity,” Brown said.

Some unemployment benefits will end Feb. 20

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau



David Gerstenfeld

Oregon’s declining three-month unemployment rate will mean the end of benefits to some people under one federal program.

But the acting director of the Oregon Employment Department said, after the program ends Feb. 20, some of them will be shifted onto another federal program that will continue into the spring.

David Gerstenfeld advises people to continue to file for their benefits weekly.

What is ending in Oregon is

the Extended Benefits program, which kicks in when a state’s three-month average unemployment rate is higher than 6.5% but below 8%. Although Oregon’s rate went up a notch, from 6% in November to 6.4% in December, Gerstenfeld said the average has now fallen below the 6.5% average threshold.

That program added 13 weeks of federal benefits onto

regular state benefits of 26 weeks.

What is continuing in Oregon is the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which Congress recently extended by 11 weeks. Gerstenfeld said some people will be moved to this federal program when Extended Benefits end Feb. 20.

Claimants will be paid retroactively. They may face delays because the switchover from one program to the other will require staff work.

Gerstenfeld said, if Oregon’s average three-month unemployment rate increases

to 6.5% or greater, the Employment Department is empowered to restart the Extended Benefits program without waiting 13 weeks. Gov. Kate Brown has approved the required authorization in advance.

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation is scheduled to end its 11-week extension after March 13. (Some benefits may be paid through April.) President Joe Biden has proposed to extend that deadline to the end of the federal budget year on Sept. 30. That proposal is part of the \$1.9 trillion economic recovery plan that is pending in Congress.

Also part of Biden’s plan are extensions of federal unemployment benefits for self-employed and gig workers in a program known as Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, and continued federal support for Work Share programs, under which participating employers pay 60% or 80% of workers’ pay and the difference is made up through unemployment benefits. Work Share normally taps the state unemployment trust fund, but since the start of the pandemic 10 months ago, federal funds have gone to those payments instead.

Oregon legislative panel starts hearing policing bills

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau



PMG file photo

Oregon legislators are considering bills about policing.

Five lawmakers on an Oregon House subcommittee will focus on the state’s policing practices and the people who carry them out.

They already have started public hearings on more than a dozen bills, some of them overlapping, that propose various changes to Oregon laws in the aftermath of last year’s death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer and the nationwide protests it triggered.

One hearing on two bills is scheduled Monday.

The subcommittee chair is Rep. Janelle Bynum, a Democrat from Clackamas who also leads the full House Judiciary Committee. Her District 51 straddles Multnomah and Clackamas counties.

Bynum, while canvassing her district in 2018, was reported as a “suspicious person” to the Clackamas County

Sheriff’s Office. She is Black.

Bynum said in opening the subcommittee’s work Jan. 25 that, while there is a need for a strong law enforcement presence, “that is not the only way to keep the peace.”

“I believe that our communities need some healing and an update to our laws so that everyone can live and breathe freely,” she added. “That is the perspective I am bringing to this committee — a sense of fairness, a sense of balance and an opportunity to fix things that have been neglected for a long time — and make sure that all of us feel safer in our

communities.”

Bynum was the House co-leader of a joint interim committee that produced half a dozen bills lawmakers passed during a special session June 24 to 26. But the committee conceded in its final report that more work needs to be done.

While several bills now before the subcommittee emerged from the interim committee, the committee never voted on its final report because it was unable to meet in person in December due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Legislature’s lawyers advised lawmakers that the Oregon

Constitution and House rules bar remote voting, unless the governor invokes a “catastrophic disaster” provision that has never been used since voters approved it in 2012.

The two Republican members of the subcommittee are former police chiefs in small communities.

Rep. Ron Noble of McMinnville was police chief from 2006 to 2014, and was with Corvallis police for 18 years before that. He also was on the joint interim committee. Part of his District 24 goes into Washington County.

“I am looking always to ensure the highest professionalism of the people that the Legislature asks to do their bidding to ensure a safe society,” Noble said in his opening statement.

Rep. Rick Lewis of Silverton was police chief from 1988 until his retirement in 2012. He was elected mayor in 2014 and appointed to the House seat in 2017. He also has been chief in

Union and Bandon, and worked in Umatilla. Part of his District 18 goes into Clackamas County.

“I want to ensure that what we do is workable, not only for law enforcement, but also addresses the concerns of our citizens,” he said.

Lewis also sat on the interim committee.

The other Democrats on the subcommittee are Maxine Dexter of Portland, a physician with Kaiser Permanente — she represents District 33 in Northwest Portland and part of Washington County — and Marty Wilde of Eugene, a lawyer who also has spent 25 years with the Oregon National Guard, both Army and Air, with overseas service.

All legislative panels are taking testimony virtually or in writing because the Capitol has been closed to the public since March 18, 2020, at the start of the pandemic. They are not expected to amend or advance bills until the midpoint of the session in April, when they will start meeting in person.

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