

Chaos coming with senior COVID-19 vaccine eligibility this week

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

The gap between COVID-19 vaccine eligibility and availability will make for a chaotic start to age-based inoculations this week.

Beginning Monday, Oregon residents 80 and older were eligible to receive their first dose of the two-shot Moderna or Pfizer vaccines.

People over 80 have accounted for just over half of the 2,002 deaths from COVID-19 in Oregon.

But Gov. Kate Brown and Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said demand vastly outstrips current supply. Allen told a House panel earlier this week that there are an estimated 168,000 people 80 and older in Oregon, which is currently receiving about 40,000 first-shot doses of the vaccine per week. This includes doses for those in earlier priority groups who haven't been inoculated yet. The required second doses are in a separate count.

It all translates to a building wave of frustration and disappointment among those who have waited for their time in line for the vaccine.

"If you watched the senior category roll out everywhere else in the



EOMG file photo

Karla Toms, a registered nurse with St. Charles Health System, administers a vaccine in the arm of Suzi Smith, of Bend, during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at the Deschutes County Fair & Expo Center in Redmond in January.

country, it was really chaotic — it's going to be chaotic here too," Allen said.

The age limit will drop five years every week until those 65 and older can receive shots March 1. But with 800,000 people in Oregon over the age of 65, eligibility will overwhelm availability well into spring.

County health agencies will be the front lines for telling those eligible where and when they might be able to be vaccinated. There is no central state registry or appointment line.

Allen said the fragmented system is necessary so that vaccination distribution matches the needs of local communities, not a "one-size-fits-all Portland" solution.

Brown acknowledged the beginning of an exasperating stretch as seniors and their families try to navigate the growing chasm between government's promise and delivery.

"I want to thank our seniors for their patience thus far, and for their continued patience in the coming days

and weeks," Brown said. "We are still managing a scarce resource. There will be hiccups in this process, but we are going to get through them."

More than 350,000 people in Oregon — about 8.8% of the population — have received at least one shot of vaccine, ranking Oregon 12th in the nation.

Oregon's vaccine priority system is already straining to get shots for groups already eligible. Medical and health workers were in group 1A, which has been largely but not wholly completed.

The other group in the top priority were residents of nursing homes, who received some of the first shots that became available late last year. Seniors in long term care facilities were vaccinated, but those living independently or with their families have had to wait.

Allen said all eligible groups will start receiving vaccinations on the date listed by the state, but will be sharing the limited supply with uncompleted priority groups ahead of them and eventually new ones behind.

Allen said OHA is aiming to have 75% of seniors receive their first shots by April, with second shots by May. The Biden administration has prom-

ised a 20% increase in vaccine shipments to Oregon.

The current Pfizer and Moderna vaccines require two shots spaced about a month apart. Once administered, they are 95% effective in preventing infection.

There are some other hopeful signs: After surging in November and December, COVID-19 infections have dropped off sharply, though are still above most levels seen in the spring and summer.

Johnson & Johnson on Thursday asked the Food and Drug Administration for emergency approval of its vaccine. If approved by late February, the vaccine could arrive in states in early March.

The upside on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is it only requires one shot. It has a lower efficiency rate of 72% in a sample U.S. population, but it can be shipped and used more rapidly than the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines.

More information is available at covidvaccine.oregon.gov. The state is also providing information through its 211 phone system, by texting ORCOVID to 898211 and by emailing ORCOVID@211info.org.

Oregon's Bentz votes against ban on ex-QAnon backer serving on House panels

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Rep. Cliff Bentz

Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, voted on Thursday against removing controversial freshman Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Georgia, from all committee assignments.

Democrats sought to remove Taylor Greene from the House Education & Labor, and Budget committees, citing her history of advancing conspiracy theories, harassing a mass shooting victim and advocating for the right-wing conspiracy theory group QAnon.

The vote, primarily along party lines, was 230-199, with 11 Republicans joining Democrats in voting yes.

"I find Representative Greene's previous comments and actions deeply offensive and totally unacceptable," said Bentz, the first-term congressman from Oregon's 2nd Congressional District. "However, she went to the House Floor to say she regrets her comments and actions."

The House debate included a 10-minute address by Taylor Greene, trying to reassure her new colleagues that she was not dangerous and disconnected from reality, as some claimed.

Her defense included statements that hinted at how far she had gone in the past.

"I also want to tell you, 9/11 absolutely happened," she said. Also real: mass shootings at schools.

Democrats said the vote was about blocking an advocate of bizarre conspiracy theories from a key role on legislation.

Oregon's four other House members, Suzanne Bonamici,

D-Beaverton, Earl Blumenauer, D-Portland, Peter DeFazio, D-Springfield, and Kurt Schrader, D-Salem, voted in favor of her removal.

The showdown over Taylor Greene was the second major test of Republican unity in less than 24 hours.

The House Republican Conference on Wednesday night turned back an effort by some members to remove Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyoming, as its chair. Some Republicans wanted to punish Cheney for being among 10 GOP House members who voted for the impeachment of President Donald Trump.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-California, asked members during the closed-door vote to retain Cheney. He also advocated for them to oppose the Democratic-led effort to remove Taylor Greene from committees.

Bentz declined to say which way he voted in the Cheney matter. NBC News, citing House members at the meeting, reported Cheney won 145-61 in the secret ballot.

Greene had a long history of statements calling school shootings and the 9/11 attacks hoaxes. She had backed the conspiracy group QAnon, which has been linked to vio-

lence, and she had posted her approval online of a post calling for the murder of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, with a "bullet to the head."

She has speculated that "space solar generators" were used to ignite wildfires in the western United States.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, made a rare comment on a House member, saying Greene would damage Republicans' credibility.

"Looney lies and conspiracy theories are cancer for the Republican Party and our country," McConnell said.



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