again

## Brown: Vaccination eligibility moved up -

Frontline workers, people with underlying health conditions are eligible to get vaccinated April 5

#### **By Gary A. Warner** Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon has again moved up the eligibility dates for COVID-19 vaccinations ahead of the national lifting of all limits on May 1.

Gov. Kate Brown said Friday that frontline workers and people with underlying health conditions are eligible to get vaccinated April 5. That is two weeks earlier than Brown announced last week when she moved the original May 1 date to April 19.

Brown said discussions with the Biden administration had given her confidence on its ability to deliver on its promise of a major increase in vaccine supply.

Eligibility does not mean availability. The state has fully vaccinated about 570,000 people since December. Estimates put the number of people aged 16 and over who can be inoculated at 3.5 million.

Oregon Health Authority officials told Brown that counties across the state had made enough progress on vaccinating people aged 65 and over to move onto new groups. There are now 22 counties that have begun vaccinating Oregonians in Phase 1B, Group 6. It includes people aged 50 and over with underlying medical conditions that could lead to a severe illness or death from contracting COVID-19. The long list of groups also includes pregnant women aged 16 and above, seasonal and migrant workers, the homeless and others.

"With so many counties across Oregon ready to begin the next phases of vaccination, I am accelerating our vaccination timelines statewide rather than proceeding county-by-county," Brown said.

Under Brown's directive on Friday, vaccination will be available beginning Monday for Phase 1B, Group 7.

Under a federal directive from the Department of Health and Human Services, Oregon and other states must scrap any eligibility limits for those aged 16 and over no later than May 1. The date was chosen by President Joe Biden and announced during his national address on March 11.

Oregon had planned a phased roll-out of vaccine that would not have allowed unrestricted eligibility until July 1. But the federal edict changed the timeline and compressed the period that vaccine could be targeted to specific groups to just 51 days between Biden's March 11 announcement and the directive going into effect May 1.

OHA Director Pat Allen said



EOMG file photo/Ryan Brennecke

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.

during a press call Friday that, if all goes well, Oregon will consider moving the unrestricted eligibility for those aged 16 and over to April 26 — five days before the May 1 date.

The advanced timeline would not be statewide. Counties that submit a letter to the Oregon Health Authority by April 15 stating they are ready to handle the additional demand will be told by April 22 if they can lift all restrictions on April 26.

While mass vaccination centers will continue to be operated by county and state health authorities, Allen said federal supplies will increasingly go to pharmacies that are easier for most residents to visit.

Allen said Oregon should have enough vaccine by June to be able to vaccinate everyone who wants a shot. As the percentages rise, OHA is increasingly concerned with the number of people who are not seeking inoculation or are actively opposed to it.

In some parts of southwestern Oregon, Allen said less than 50% of seniors were indicating they wanted to be vaccinated. Some of those counties are among those with the highest infection rates as the rest of the state's caseload drops.

If the state continues on its trend of lowering the infection rate and case totals statewide, more steps can be taken toward allowing ever larger events, said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top infectious disease expert.

Large outdoor events such as the Olympic Trials in Eugene in June and the Pendleton Round-Up in mid-September could be held with masking and hygiene safeguards. Sidelinger said the state hoped to send out guidance for major summer events by next month.

"We're in a much better place" coming into the summer event season than last year, Sidelinger said.

An increase in infection rates or an outbreak of one of the new more contagious variants of the virus that are circulating in the nation could undercut progress.

The OHA team underscored that the best way to ensure that popular events and places can once again be safely enjoyed was to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Brown promised that the state will work to ensure that vaccine access for underrepresented communities.

"As we vaccinate our frontline workers and all Oregonians with underlying health conditions, we will work to make sure vaccines reach the communities that have been hardest hit by COVID-19: Oregon's Black, Indigenous, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Tribal and communities of color," Brown said.

Currently, most people are inoculated with two shots of either Moderna or Pfizer vaccine given a month apart. A third vaccine, a single-shot dose by Johnson & Johnson was recently approved.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen testified March 24 that the state was receiving reports of manufacturing and delivery delays on the Johnson & Johnson doses. He told the House COVID-19 subcommittee that the new one-shot vaccine was a key part of reaching state and federal goals for inoculations.

Allen earlier this week signed an order activating Oregon's use of a federal law that allows for a vast expansion of who can give vaccinations. There are now 30 different professional and student groups approved to inject people with vaccine. The law protects them from liability with the exception of "gross negligence."

Brown said mobile health units and pop-up vaccine centers would increase the state's ability to get shots into arms in more areas.

"Increased supplies, expanding eligibility will allow health care providers and community-based organizations to be more efficient in their efforts to vaccinate hard-toreach communities," she said.

Brown's new directives came as the state reported a slight upswing in infection rates after a long decline since the peak levels around the end of last year.

The United States passed another milestone this week, with over 30 million cases since February 2020, resulting in 546,915 deaths.

Worldwide, there have been just under 125.7 million infections and over 2.75 million deaths.

# Legislative budget writers come up with 2021-23 framework

Plan maintains services without many cuts originally proposed Dec. 1

#### By Peter Wong Oregon Capital Bureau

The co-leaders of the Oregon Legislature's budget committee have laid out their framework for balancing the next two-year state budget with more than \$2 billion in federal aid from President Joe Biden's pandemic recovery plan.

framework, which they The announced March 24, will enable lawmakers to maintain state aid to public schools, state-supported health care and other services without many of the cuts proposed in Gov. Kate Brown's original \$25.6 billion budget back on Dec. 1. The state school fund will be at \$9.1 billion, excluding the money from the corporate activity tax that districts get for targeted programs and separate federal aid to enable districts to reopen schools. The Oregon Health Plan, which enrolls 1.25 million low-income people, will be maintained without cuts. The federal government has raised its share of the joint federal-state program through Dec. 31 of this year. The budget framework also proposes \$780 million from Oregon's \$2.6 billion share of federal aid for programs and services envisioned under Biden's plan, which became law on March 12. The overall \$1.9 trillion plan passed both houses of Congress without any Republican support. "The federal aid in the American Rescue Plan is a game-changer," Rep. Dan Rayfield, a Democrat from Corvallis and one of the chief budget writers, said in a statement. "This support is critical to our recovery and will help the state continue vital programs and services for Oregonians who have been disproportionately impacted by the crises of the past year."

But the budget framework of almost \$28 billion from the tax-supported general fund and lottery proceeds will leave \$520 million of that federal aid unspent until the 2023-25 budget cycle, when tax collections are also projected to fall short of meeting current service levels.

The budget committee leaders also propose a record \$250 million allocation to the state emergency fund, given the continuing uncertainties about the coronavirus pandemic and wildfires. (The Legislature gave more money to the Emergency Board, which decides budget matters between sessions, but only after two special sessions in 2020.)

"Our framework addresses unprec-

#### Shifting millions

The state's new two-year budget cycle starts July 1. Instead of field meetings, which the pandemic precludes, the budget committee will schedule virtual hearings soon on the framework.

"This is just the beginning of the process," House Republican Leader Christine Drazan of Canby said in a statement. "We look forward to hearing from our communities and working with our colleagues to determine how we can provide ongoing support for recovery and continue the programs and services important to families and children."

Awaiting votes in both chambers is a continuing resolution that keeps agencies funded past June 30, if lawmakers have not yet approved their budgets.

### Virus variants and vaccine deliveries challenge Oregon fight against COVID-19

#### By Gary A. Warner Oregon Capital Bureau

A virulent COVID-19 variant is concerning Oregon health officials as they race to vaccinate up to up to three million more residents.

Oregon celebrated its one-millionth vaccine shot March 24. All but a tiny fraction are the two-shot Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, putting the fully vaccinated number of state residents at your over 577,000.

"Today marks an important milestone in our state — this would not have been possible without the dedication of our vaccinators around Oregon," said OHA Director Pat Allen. unknown. Oregon received over 34,000 doses earlier this month and counted on the one-shot inoculations to rapidly increase the number of people in the state who are considered vaccinated.

Oregon continues to receive about 200,000 doses per week of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, which require two shots spaced about a month apart. The dependence on the two-shot regime means the state has actually fully vaccinated just over 500,000 people. That is the number of residents who will be newly eligible on March 29. Another more than half million people - including frontline and essential workers eligible April 19. The remainder of the population can seek shots as of May 1.

edented challenges as we await further federal guidance with respect to the American Rescue Plan money designated for Oregon," Sen. Betsy Johnson, a Democrat from Scappoose and a budget co-leader, said. "Our document is sufficiently flexible to respond during budget negotiations. However, it also prudently anticipates potential challenges for the 2023-25 budget."

Counties and cities also will get share of federal aid under Biden's plan. Cities with populations of 50,000 and up, and all counties, will get their money from the U.S. Treasury. Smaller cities will get theirs through the state, based on population.

Unlike Brown's budget, which proposed tapping the state education reserve fund, the legislative framework would leave both the education and general reserve funds untouched. Lawmakers did draw \$400 million from the education reserve fund last year, cutting it in half.

The state budget spends more money than the tax-supported general fund and lottery proceeds. But most of that money is in the form of earmarked federal grants or other sources, such as fuel taxes. Unlike the governor, who proposes a single budget, lawmakers approve individual agency budgets and other bills that fit into the co-chairs' framework. The Legislature's budget analysts keep track of the bills.

Budget subcommittees have heard agency presentations but still have to do much of the detailed work on individual agencies. The first agency budget emerged from the full committee on March 19.

Brown's budget proposes a shift of \$280 million into programs intended to overcome the effects of discrimination against Oregon's racial and ethnic minorities. The budget co-leaders said they are continuing discussions with lawmakers of color — who now hold 12 of the 90 House and Senate seats — and others about how to incorporate those changes into the budget.

"It's important to protect services that Oregonians depend on, and to make investments to overcome disparities caused by systemic racism," Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, a Democrat from Beaverton and a budget co-leader, said. Allen reported the statistics during his weekly testimony before the House COVID-19 committee.

There was good news: Along with the one million shot mark, Oregon continues to show a long, steep decline in infections and deaths since the winter. OHA's risk level report for counties has only two of 36 rated as extreme infection risk: Coos and Curry.

Twenty counties have been given the green light to vaccinate the next group of eligible Oregonians. They include people age 45 and above with underlying medical conditions, pregnant women 16 and over, along with several other categories.

OHA has expanded the pool of people who can give vaccines to 30 groups, from doctors and nurses to midwives and optometry students.

But Oregon's program is also experiencing headaches, hiccups and hints of some troubling signs.

Allen told a legislative committee that Oregon had been told that supplies of the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine are delayed, with the date of additional shipment Allen said dates when newly eligible groups start seeking vaccinations create "pinch points" where demand outstrips supply.

"We heavily depend on there being Johnson & Johnson in the state," Allen said.

The presence of the "L.A. Variant," known to scientists as B.1.429, has been increasingly detected in wastewater samples statewide in recent months. It has been found in about 20% of wastewater samples taken around the state, but has not shown up in positive tests in people as yet.

Allen said the variant is estimated to be 20% more transmissible than the original COVID-19 virus.

The variant can also have a "moderate impact" on vaccines and "significant impact" on some treatments for people who become infected with COVID-19, Allen said. Existing vaccines are projected to be effective at preventing severe illness or death from the variants.

