

Brown sets June 21 target to end COVID-19 limits

State about 127,000 adults short of 70% vaccination goal

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Nearly all COVID-19 restrictions could be lifted in as early as just over two weeks, Gov. Kate Brown said Friday.

The state is about 127,000 adults short of the goal of getting at least one shot of vaccine into 70% of eligible residents.

Once the state crosses the threshold, Brown said she would lift masking, business capacity, event size, social distance and other limits that Oregonians have dealt with for more than a year.

"We can fully reopen — we can all look forward to that," she said.

Local health officials would then take over the daily decision-making and operations in counties from the Oregon Health Authority.

Brown said even very large events, such as the Pendleton Round-Up in September, would be good to go once the state hits its target vaccination rate.

Oregon's statewide mark stood at 66.2% on Wednesday. OHA Director Pat Allen said, if the current pace continues, the mark would be hit about June 21.

"This is not a slam dunk," Allen said.

Allen said that the June 30 deadline set earlier in the year by the governor was well within reach.

"It will take a lot of work by a lot of people to get it done," Allen said.

Lifting restrictions would include:

- Ending the risk level system for counties of lower, moderate, high and extreme.
- Ending a state requirement for masks and face coverings in almost all settings. Exceptions would be airports, public transit and health care settings that follow federal agency guidelines.



Gov. Kate Brown in 2018.

EOMG file photo

"WE CAN FULLY REOPEN — WE CAN ALL LOOK FORWARD TO THAT."

—Gov. Kate Brown

• End requirements for individuals to show vaccination verification in public venues and businesses.

• Allow K-12 students to attend school in-person, full time, five days per week.

K-12 guidance is being revised to support schools in safely delivering in-person instruction throughout the school day.

Current health and safety standards, including indoor mask requirements, will remain in place in workplaces, schools and child care settings. Colleges and universities can make their own decisions on protocols after considering guidance from the Centers for Disease Control.

Brown said the move would not mean the pandemic was over in Oregon. She will re-examine whether or not to lift her emergency order that gave her a wide latitude on public health decisions.

"The pandemic will not be over," Brown said.

To try to increase the vaccination rate toward the goal, many pharmacies will extend hours to reach out to more people who want shots.

"Some people are not vaccine resistant, but vaccine inconvenienced," Allen said.

Brown also reiterated plans to give away \$1 million to a vaccinated Oregonian, along with \$10,000 to a vaccinated person in each of the 36 counties. Scholarships worth \$100,000 are also being offered to lucky vaccinated youth.

Brown and OHA officials said it was time to push past the current levels of inoculation as medical evidence and state statistics show the impact of the virus has separated residents into two groups with very different likely futures.

Those with vaccination are almost completely free of infections, severe illness and death.

But the pandemic is still "a shadow" across the state for those who are not inoculated. OHA said nine out of 10 deaths are currently among people who have no record of vaccination.

Children, immunocompromised and those who have not been able to get vaccinated must still be considered when communities decide what steps to take.

"There are still Oregonians who need to take extra precautions to feel and stay safe," Brown said.

Those battling cancer and organ donors were among those still needing protection. There are also many Oregon kids who are not yet eligible for a vaccine.

"So, it will remain incredibly important for Oregonians to continue making smart choices," Brown said.

OHA will continue to monitor the global pandemic and provide assistance and resources, but will increasingly advise local officials on measures to take.

OHA and CDC are expected to issue more guidance in coming days as the state nears the 70% goal.

Republican lawmakers take aim at new gun storage law

Opponents will have to gather 74,680 signatures by Sept. 25

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

One day after Democratic Gov. Kate Brown signed it, three Republican state representatives set in motion a petition drive that seeks to force a statewide election on new firearms storage requirements and a ban on firearms in some public places.

The documents for a referendum were filed Wednesday, June 2, by Reps. Mike Nearman of Independence, E. Werner Reschke of Klamath Falls and David Brock Smith of Port Orford.

All of them voted against Senate Bill 554, which requires locks and safe storage for firearms and bars an estimated 300,000 holders of concealed-handgun licenses from bringing firearms into the Capitol in Salem and the passenger terminal at Portland International Airport. The bill would allow firearms bans by public schools, community colleges and universities in their buildings and on their grounds if their governing boards agree.

House Republican Leader Christine Drazan of Canby called for a petition drive during House debate on the bill on April 29. She did so to rebut critics who said Republicans should have walked out and denied Democrats the two-thirds majority (40) required to conduct business in the House. (Unlike previous years, however, House rules now in effect enable Speaker Tina Kotek to levy fines of \$500 per day for unexcused absences.)

For a referendum to qualify for a statewide ballot, opponents will have to gather 74,680 signatures — equal to 4% of the votes cast for governor in 2018 — by Sept. 25, 90 days after the projected June 27 close of the 2021 Legislature. The secretary of state would have 30 days to verify signatures.

If enough signatures are ver-

ified, the new law is suspended until the statewide vote takes place in the November 2022 general election. A "yes" vote upholds the law as passed by the Legislature; a "no" vote would throw it out. If voters upheld the law, it would take effect 30 days after the election once results are certified.

Such referendum elections have met with success and failure over the past 25 years.

Oregon voters in 2014 overturned the Legislature's approval of a 2013 bill allowing driver cards to people unable to prove legal presence in the United States. (The Legislature in 2019 passed a different bill that had an emergency clause, which prevented a referendum; opponents were unable to gather sufficient signatures for an initiative measure, which has a higher total.)

They also rejected in 2004 tax increases lawmakers passed in 2003 to balance the state budget and, in 1998, rejected a measure lawmakers passed in 1997 to reimpose criminal penalties for possession of less than one ounce of marijuana.

On the other hand, voters in 2010 upheld tax increases lawmakers passed in 2009 to balance the state budget and, in 2018, upheld legislatively approved taxes on hospitals, insurers and some health providers to raise money for the Oregon Health Plan for low-income people.

Nearman is under indictment in Marion County Circuit Court on a charge of first-degree official misconduct and a charge of criminal trespass in connection with his allowing anti-lockdown protesters to enter the Capitol — closed since March 18, 2020, because of the coronavirus pandemic — during a Dec. 21 special session of the Legislature. Some protesters breached the building but were ejected by police, though the protesters caused damage to the Capitol.

Nearman's next scheduled court date is later in June. He also is the subject of a complaint pending before the House Committee on Conduct.

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