

Grant County reports seventh COVID-19-related death

At 40% vaccination rate, county administering nine shots per day on average

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

A seventh Grant County resident died after contracting COVID-19.

A 68-year-old man with no known underlying medical conditions who resided in Grant County tested positive for COVID-19 on May 9, according to Kimberly Lindsay, the county's public health administrator.

Lindsay said after various medical interventions the person died May 27 at an out-of-state hospital, but the health department did not receive the report until June 8.

Lindsay said the family believed that the cause of death was COVID-19.

Despite the news of the death and five people testing positive on June 9, she felt "very good" about the county's overall COVID-19 numbers. She said the county is seeing an average of only a few cases a week.

Grant County's vaccination rate of 40% for people 16 and older is the highest in Eastern Oregon, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

As of June 9, Harney and Malheur counties were both at 38% for those 16 and older while Lake and Gillam Counties vaccinated 37% and 34%.

Grant County's seven-day vaccination average as of June 9 was nine doses per day, according to OHA's website.



Eagle file photo

Grant County Health Department staff member reviews a COVID-19 rapid test in November.



Eagle file photo

Grant County Public Health Administrator Kimberly Lindsay

Lindsay said, when the statewide vaccination rate hits 70%, Gov. Kate Brown will remove the COVID-19 restrictions.

She told the court that counties that reach 65% before then could see mask guidance and other restrictions go away, but she said Grant County would not get to that percentage based on current trends.

"No judgment on that," she said. "That is just a fact."

She said the county would need to wait for the state to hit the 70% rate. As of June 10 Oregon Health Authority reported the state was at 67%.

Lindsay said she does not know if the virus variant B.1.526 that health officials identified last month is still at play in the county. However, Lindsay said the variant greatly fac-

tored into the "havoc" of the county's second surge of infections in April and early May. She said the first occurred in the fall.

At one point during the second surge, the county's infection rate was among the highest nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

However, it appears that the county dodged a significant worst-case scenario with the virus variant.

An analysis published with the CDC found that the virus variant B.1.526, which emerged rapidly in New York City, did not lead to infections and re-infections at a higher rate than other virus forms.

Additionally, two independent laboratory studies out of New York demonstrated that antibodies stimulated by the Pfizer-BioNTech and

Moderna vaccines work against the "New York" virus variant.

Lindsay estimated that less than 1% of the people in Grant County who contracted COVID-19 had died.

She said the number could potentially be lower due to positive cases that go unreported. County Commissioner Sam Palmer added that he knew of "several" cases that went unreported.

Lindsay noted, while treatment is "helpful" when someone contracts the virus, the person who died last month went through treatments that, in the end, did not save his life. She said, when one does recover, they typically have immunity for roughly 90 days.

Lindsay told the court that COVID-19 is not something to

"mess around with." "I'm very grateful that our numbers have been low," she said. "The end of March, April and early May were hell."

She said there were many deaths, and the surge impacted both senior and health care facilities in the area.

Lindsay said many people were air-flighted out of the county for treatment during that time.

Prairie City resident Frances Preston said that she was fully vaccinated in February.

"I didn't have to worry about any of that hell," she said.

Preston, in a "personal testimony" to the court, said she wanted people who are apprehensive about getting vaccinated, because of the "horror stories" swirling around that it cause damage to the body, that she feels "perfectly normal."

"I'm not possessed by anything," she said. "I don't feel like there's something within me that is destroying me."

Preston said some people still believe the vaccine is "illegitimate" and could severely damage their health.

Lindsay said the county had not had any bad outcomes from vaccinations other than flu-like symptoms that lasted no longer than a week.

As of June 10, Oregon Health Authority reports that COVID-19 has claimed the lives of roughly 2,700 Oregonians since the beginning of the pandemic. Nationwide, the CDC reports that 600,000 Americans have died.

Owens introduces bill to ban vaccine passports

Face coverings would not be required for those who refuse to disclose vaccination status

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle



Mark Owens, R-Crane

Grant County's state representative introduced legislation that would ban vaccine passports in Oregon.

Mark Owens, R-Crane, introduced House Bill 3407 last week to "protect the privacy and rights of Oregonians," according to a press release.

The legislation would prevent any public body — state, local or special government — from issuing a requirement for proof of vaccination from COVID-19.

Owens said in the release that the bill is not an argument over COVID-19 or the vaccine. Instead, he said the bill is about people's rights.

"I believe the choice to get a vaccine is a personal, private medical decision that should be made between an individual and their medical provider," he said. "And that Oregonians should be free to make that choice for themselves."

The bill forbids a person or public body from requiring someone to disclose if they have been immunized before accessing credit, insurance, education, facilities, medical services, housing or accommodations, travel, entry into the state, employment or to purchase goods or services.

The press release said these entities would not be able to require someone to wear a face covering should someone refuse to disclose their vaccine status.

The bill applies only to the COVID-19 vaccinations and

would not change any current laws regarding other immunizations for other diseases for schools and children's facilities.

Gov. Kate Brown announced last month that fully vaccinated people are not required to wear a mask indoors in public settings where vaccination status is checked.

Still, the state mandates businesses, employers and churches to continue requiring masks unless they review people's vaccination cards.

The state epidemiologist, Dean Sidlelinger, recently said that requiring someone to disclose their vaccination status does not violate patient privacy laws when given the option.

Masks are still required in health care settings, jails, K-12 schools, planes, buses and airports.

The bill was requested in partnership with the Eastern Oregon Counties Association.

County offering \$50 gift certificates for COVID-19 vaccinations

Other prizes also available

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

With COVID-19 vaccination rates lagging behind the statewide average, Grant County leaders are offering \$50 gift certificates and other prizes to people who roll up their sleeves to get the shot.

Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County's public health administrator, said every county in the state received vaccine incentive dollars based on population to educate residents and promote the vaccine.

County Court Judge Scott Myers said the county received roughly \$80,000 in incentive dollars. Each new person who is vaccinated will receive \$50 in Greenbacks.

With help from Court Appointed Special Advocates, the county purchased \$8,000 in Grant County Chamber of Commerce Greenbacks — redeemable vouchers at participating local businesses that are members of the chamber — that went to attendees at the mobile

vaccination unit that came through the county May 24-28, according to Lindsay Rausch, CASA's COVID-19 response program manager.

County Judge Scott Myers said Wednesday the county is also looking to reward people already vaccinated.

"We're going to try and go back retroactively to those who already received their shot," he said, "whether they do it in chamber bucks, or however to do it so that the money can only be spent at local small businesses."

Lindsay said every county in the state is looking at ways to spend the money, and most counties are going beyond education to encourage people to roll up their sleeves and get the shot.

She said the county could opt to put up billboards and posters, but most are implementing gift cards, drawings and scholarships.

Rausch said a resident won a YETI cooler filled with picnic and outdoor supplies at last month's vaccine event. She said the county would raffle another YETI Hopper Flip at a future vaccine event.

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