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Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle
Grant Union High School students cheer on the girls basketball team Saturday, Jan. 8.

Local schools double down

Grant County districts focus on safety protocols rather than pausing activities amid COVID-19 surge

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Grant County school districts say they are redoubling their efforts on safety protocols such as indoor masking and testing to stem the spread of COVID-19 at school events instead of hitting the pause button on extracurricular activities.

The resolve to increase pandemic protocols comes on the heels of a Jan. 3 advisory issued by state health and education officials stating that schools must either pause extracurricular activities or ensure they follow specific COVID-19 safety protocols.

According to the advisory, schools that choose to continue sports and other activities should communicate to families the potential risks posed by the surging omicron variant.

“If schools and other organizations proceed with extracurricular activities, especially as these activities move indoors and individuals are unmasked, they should expect rapid transmission of COVID-19 that will prevent students from participating in in-person learning due to isolation for those that contract COVID-19 and lengthy quarantines for those that come into close contact with infected individuals,” the advisory said.

The advisory recommends that schools that choose to hold extracurricular activities enforce mitigation strategies such as the use of face coverings indoors.

Grant School District Superintendent Bret Uptmor said Friday that the district’s goal is to continue to carry out its mitigation strategies in hopes of preventing an outbreak.

According to a Jan. 5 post on the Grant Union High School Facebook page, in addition to continuing to require face coverings indoors at its events, the school temporarily closed its concession stand and is now barring food in the gym.

Laura Thomas, Monument’s school superintendent, said her district is continuing to use physical distancing, masking and thorough cleaning while encouraging strong hygiene practices as a means to minimize, and hopefully prevent, any spread of illness.

Prairie City Superintendent Casey Hallgarth said in a Friday email that the district decided to hold extracurricular activities after discussing the matter with staff and the athletic director.

“We will work closely with our local health authority as we have been doing to make sure that if a time comes that we have to close our school or stop the extracurricular activities, we will,” Hallgarth said.

Hallgarth said he wants people to know that the school wants everyone to be and feel safe.

Masks and hand sanitizer are located at the front door at the school’s sporting events, Hallgarth said, and he said he asks that everyone mask up when attending the school’s home games.

Hallgarth said while the school has local control over this decision, the district needs to work hand in hand

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Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle
Kelly McNitt, Blue Mountain Hospital’s director of nursing services, talks about the omicron variant of the coronavirus in one of the hospital’s negative pressure rooms on Monday, Jan. 10. Last week the hospital set a daily record with seven COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Surge, bad weather strain health system

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

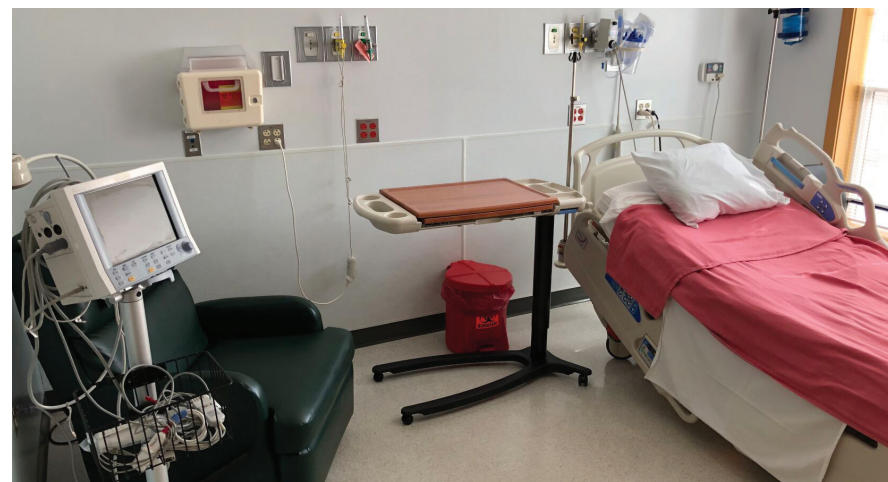
Surging COVID-19 case counts driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant appear to be impacting a number of Grant County health care facilities operated by the Blue Mountain Hospital District, with severe winter weather playing a role as well.

COVID-related hospitalizations set a record last week at Blue Mountain Hospital, which had seven patients diagnosed with the disease at one point, but the number had dropped to just one as of Monday, Jan. 11.

In a phone interview on Friday, Jan. 7, Blue Mountain Hospital District CEO Derek Daley told the Eagle that emergency transportation relief from the state helped get patients to other hospitals as road conditions improved. Additionally, he said, the hospital discharged a couple of patients.

Daley said the hospital’s staffing shortage reached a “critical point” on Tuesday and Wednesday, but with employees returning from quarantine they were “sitting pretty well” by the end of the week. Altogether, he said, the hospital had roughly five employees who became infected with coronavirus.

Daley emphasized that number was an estimate and added that the hospital did



Contributed Photo
Blue Mountain Hospital has been experiencing a record number of coronavirus hospitalizations due to a combination of soaring infection rates and bad weather that restricted patient transfers.

not have any emergency staffers infected with the virus. However, he said that the state sent two EMS technicians to assist the hospital with patient transportation due to weather concerns.

Meanwhile, upwards of 10 staff members at Blue Mountain Care Center, a senior assisted living facility in Prairie City, tested positive for the virus, Daley said. At the same time, an unknown number of residents came down with the virus as well.

Daley said the state dispatched a regis-

tered nurse and six certified nursing assistants to shore up the staffing shortfall there. He added it was unclear how long the staffers will remain at the care center.

The immediate concern, according to Daley, is to ensure staffing support for the next few weeks. Beyond that, he would like to solidify a contract with the state for the next couple of months to get through the winter.

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Dispatches from the Flying J

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Brenda Holman belongs to a dying generation of truckers.

Her blazer is embroidered with “Aunt B.” on the right breast. She jokes that she is an aunt to seven, mother to none. A byproduct of the lifestyle, she said. She noted it was difficult to find a partner. She’s been a trucker for more than 32 years.

Inside her truck, a collection of books. A physical map of interstates. A small bed, slightly disheveled. A CB radio hangs above the driver’s seat. A smattering of notebooks and pens placed neatly on the dashboard. A small monitor attached to the



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group
Trucker Ken Spriggs makes his way toward the Flying J Travel Center, La Grande, after winter weather Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022, forced the shutdown of Interstate 84 and other roads. Now 78, he said he is considering making this his last season of driving.

dash for checking the routes, though she usually uses her phone to find information on road closures.

Her CB radio has become quieter over the years, with less

chatter coming over the airwaves. She remembered when truck stops were abuzz with truckers swapping stories and jokes over coffee whenever the roads were closed.

On Wednesday, Jan. 5, she found herself stuck for more than 24 hours at Flying J Travel Center, La Grande, as repeated accidents, heavy snow and maintenance closed down Interstate 84. It had been closed off and on several times during the past week. Snowdrifts one day, wrecks and traffic blockages by unchained semitrailers the next. Dozens of other truck drivers had been stranded there, as well.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been shut down with this many trucks parked,” Holman said.

Rows of trucks were parked, placed and maneuvered into the lot, blocking each other in and forming a logistical slide puzzle, one made trickier when the

roads were clear.

She was anxious to leave Flying J — the roads had just opened eastbound, albeit briefly — and solicited other truck drivers to move their rigs so she could maneuver out of the lot. As one driver left — a day-route driver without a sleeping rig in the cabin who wanted to find a hotel for the night — space was cleared for her exit. But it was just a hair too late, as I-84 was closed yet again due to unchained semis blocking the route.

A few dogs perked their heads up over the dashboards in the trucks at the parking lot. Some drivers, Holman said, will bring dogs or family along on

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