

Activities

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with the Grant County Health Department to make the best decisions for students and staff.

"The past two years that we have been dealing with this has been a rollercoaster ride," Hallgarth said. "I honestly can't say with confidence that Oregon schools will be in a position to have local control because of the new variants that are coming out."

Brandon Haberly, Dayville School District's superintendent, did not immediately respond to the Eagle's request for comment.

Kimberly Lindsay, the county's public health administrator, said people should be thoughtful about attending large social gatherings given the surge in COVID-19 cases and the record number of hospitalizations last week. However, she said she does not support school closures or other lockdowns.

As of Jan. 5, coronavirus cases were up 140% statewide from the previous week, according to the state health authority's data. During the same period, an average of seven new cases per day were reported in Grant County, a 92% increase. One out of every six Grant County residents has had the virus, a total of 1,231 reported cases since the start of the pandemic.

In a Friday, Jan. 8, press conference, Oregon Health Authority officials painted a bleak picture of the next few weeks to come as the omicron variant tears across the state. That picture includes coronavirus-related staffing shortages at schools, hospitals and businesses.

At the same time, Grant County educators say they don't want to add to the pandemic-related stress that high school students and athletes have endured over the last two years.

For his part, Uptmor said that school activities are an extension of the classroom for students.

"Our kids learn a lot in those environments," he said. "To put them on pause would be similar to if we just close the school."

Whether they are participating as spectators or players, he said, sports give students the opportunity to engage with their peers and make decisions based on those interactions.

"When I think about a comprehensive education system, you need to have the ability to troubleshoot and use problem-solving skills. Those aren't just automatically taught within the distribution of our curriculums," Uptmor said. "We try to do some of that problem-solving in the classroom, but experiences create those opportunities."

Hospital

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As of Wednesday, Jan. 5, the Oregon Health Authority was reporting an outbreak with 15 cases of COVID-19 associated with the Strawberry Wilderness Community Clinic in John Day. Daley said he was only aware of four or five clinic employees who have tested positive since early December, but workplace outbreaks can also include household members or other close contacts of people who work at a particular facility.

While the situation has now eased considerably, soaring case counts and extreme weather conditions combined last week to put a severe strain on Blue Mountain Hospital's limited resources. The John Day hospital is licensed for 25 beds but is currently staffed for 16.

Ordinarily, patients who need a higher level of care can be transferred to larger hospitals in Bend or Boise, freeing up bed space at Blue Mountain, but stormy weather and icy roads temporarily limited transportation options.

Rebekah Rand, the hospital's emergency services manager, said last week that the ability to transfer patients by air was rapidly changing

and dependent on the weather conditions at the accepting hospital and Grant County Regional Airport.

Even when the airport is open, she said, the pilot of any incoming flight has the final say on whether they come or not.

Ground transportation options were also limited until road conditions improved later in the week, Rand said.

COVID-19 admissions at Blue Mountain Hospital reached a peak late last week. Kimberly Lindsay, Grant County's public health administrator, told the Eagle on Thursday, Jan. 6, that seven people of various ages were hospitalized with the virus.

She said the hospital was being impacted by the virus on both the front and back end.

"There are two ways that hospital systems get impacted," she said. "They get impacted on the front with infected individuals, and they get impacted on the back end with staffing shortages due to staff becoming ill with the virus."

Both of those things happened during the week, Lindsay said.

Lori Lane, the public information officer for the hospital district, said Blue Mountain Hospital would be limiting its patients to one visitor per day, except for end-of-life visits. At

the same time, she said, all other district services would remain available and operational as usual.

Lane said those interested in virtual care options where applicable were encouraged to discuss them with their primary care provider or registration staff.

She said those with COVID-related symptoms should call the hospital ahead of time to prevent the spread of the virus among patients and staff and that the state's pandemic protocols are still required upon entry to the hospital.

With case counts soaring across the country and the state, more emphasis is now being placed on testing.

Last week, Gov. Kate Brown ordered 12 million at-home COVID-19 tests. Lindsay said Grant County would be receiving more than 1,000 tests altogether.

Lindsay said there are two tests in each box, similar to those sold at pharmacies.

According to Lindsay, hospitals will receive roughly three times as many tests as public health departments.

In an email on Monday, Jan. 10, Lane said she did not know how many tests the hospital will be getting or when it would receive its shipment.

She said the hospital and other entities are working on a plan with the health department to distribute tests throughout the county.

Meanwhile, the Oregon Health Authority reported 56 hospitalizations on Monday in region seven, which Grant County shares with Deschutes, Harney, Klamath, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake and Wheeler counties.

The hospital has six negative pressure rooms, otherwise referred to as isolation rooms, for patients infected with the virus, according to Lane. Additionally, Lane said, the hospital has a five-bed COVID-19 unit in the event of a surge in hospitalizations.

According to Kelly McNitt, the hospital's director of nursing services, Grant County's soaring case count mirrors what health officials see statewide and across the country.

In a press conference on Friday, Jan. 7, health officials with the state noted that they expect the strain on hospitals to peak at the end of the month.

"We're seeing some people get pretty sick," Lindsay said. "And it is impacting a broad spectrum of people, and we just really want to emphasize the importance (of taking precautions against infection)."

Truckers

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the routes. Partnering up, she said. It is a lonely profession. None of the truck drivers along the route had known each other, despite some driving along the same route for years. Holman said that she hasn't seen some of her co-workers back in Nebraska for several years.

For brief moments, she and a couple of truck drivers she hadn't met before spoke outside as snow fell, and joked about the closure.

"I think we're stuck here till spring," one of the drivers said.

Past time

Ken Spriggs, 78, is a day-route truck driver. That means he goes home every night — at least when he's not stuck in a road closure spanning several days.

He said he has a daughter in Elgin he was thinking of staying with for the night if the roads didn't soon open up. Working for a company based in Vale, he has been a truck driver for 12 years. Before that, a police officer

with Prairie City for 20 years. Further back, a veteran stationed in South Korea just after the creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. He said he's been shot at in both jobs. He collects two pensions, but continues to work because he enjoys keeping busy and loathes idleness.

"I just hate sitting around," Spriggs said, walking toward the Flying J, reminiscing of past days. "I used to come here and eat all the time, years ago. Those were the good days. Awesome restaurant, we ate — my daughter always met me here, and we'd eat like crazy."

His truck was parked along Highway 30, several hundred feet away from the truck stop. He said he thinks this might be his last season driving the route.

"I thought about quitting these guys, but they said no," Spriggs said, filling up a coffee cup.

He charmed his way into a cheaper cup of coffee from the counter clerk, said it was a refill. He wasn't interested in watching TV. He sat down at a Subway counter and looked out the window. Rock ballads

from the '80s played over the Flying J's sound system. The trucks outside are packed in like sardines.

"I spent a lot of years here," Spriggs said, reminiscing. "I think I might just make this my last run."

Extended stay

Michael Cruz had been at the Flying J for two days due to closures. He was sitting sideways on a lounge chair in the back watching television. Next to him, Randy Payne, a truck driver of 10 years, was watching the television as well. Payne had been there for two hours.

A string of commercials played over the TV. Payne wore a Pittsburgh Steelers beanie, a well-worn and stained reflective vest, and a Bluetooth headset. He was checking his phone, passing the time.

"Other than your CB receiver, you have nobody around you," Payne said. "That's it. It's a mindset. Trucking is a lifestyle; it's not a job, it's a lifestyle. You are living in a walk-in closet. You live there for two to six weeks at a time. You're away from your family — I don't

live here, I live in Albuquerque. It can be a dream job for somebody, but the wife has to sign on for it, the husband has to sign on for it, the kids sign on for it."

Truck drivers are paid per mile. Typically, it's under 50 cents per mile, lower for newer drivers, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers. When the trucks aren't moving, the drivers aren't getting paid, and the companies aren't turning profits. It's a pressure that incentivizes long hours and driving in poor conditions.

"There are some companies that will be 'Go, go, go!' no matter what," Payne said of the pressure to keep the wheels turning. "With my company, I don't really feel that way."

Time is the enemy. If you keep still, you make no money. Boredom creeps in. Some pass time with video games, or movies, or books — or hitting refresh on TripCheck or news stations for an update on when the roads open back up.

"I was supposed to be in Seattle today," Payne said, "and that's not happening."



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Notice: Certified Water Right Holders
Water Right Holders! Have you done any irrigation efficiency projects in the last five years? You may be legally eligible to irrigate more lands.

Contact the Oregon Water Resources Department for more information - (503) 986-0900

Get the state one-pager at https://www.oregon.gov/owrd/WRDFormsPDF/ACW_FAQ_8_2014.pdf
ACW@water.Oregon.gov email for questions

Oregon Revised Statutes
537.455-537.500 Ore
Admin Rules 690-18

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Allocation of Conserved Water

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