Governor Brown 'diverts' 600 COVID vaccines away from Morrow County

'It is becoming apparent some Oregonians are more equal than others'

By David Sykes

Emotions ran high last week during a meeting of local government officials after two planned COVID-19 vaccination events were cancelled when Governor Kate Brown diverted 600 vaccine doses away from Morrow County to use in the Portland area. Morrow was one of nine counties that received little or no vaccines after Brown decided to send 32,000 total additional doses to the metro area instead of the rural counties.

COVID-19 vaccines are allocated to counties on a weekly basis. Morrow County has not received any vaccines two out of the past three weeks county officials say. They requested 600 vaccines the previous week and were told their allotment was approved. The county scrambled to set up the two vaccinating "events" for Boardman on Friday Feb. 5 and Heppner on Friday Jan. 29. On Wednesday, Jan. 27 the county received word the vaccines had been 'diverted' and so no additional vaccines were coming to Morrow County. Consequently, both vaccinating events were cancelled.

According to the Governor's office the vaccines were diverted because Morrow County had enough vaccines to inoculate its health care workers and phase 1a individuals, so the vaccine was being sent to the metro area which had still not vaccinated this high-risk group. Teachers and school staff were recently added into the high-risk group to receive vaccinations first. Morrow County's two vaccination events were for next tier risk level of older people. Oregon is reportedly the only state that has moved teachers and school staff to its high-risk category.

Whatever the reason, last Thursday's meeting was attended not only by the three Morrow County commissioners, but also by Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock and State Representative Greg Smith and emotions ran high. "We need to get this decision making back into the hands of the local authorities or the association of Oregon counties and let some adults lead this damn discussion," said Commissioner Jim Doherty at the start of the meeting. "When you look at the map on who is getting the vaccine there is nobody that has been more afflicted than Morrow and Umatilla counties," he said of the state-wide infection rates.

Across the state Morrow County is rated number three and Umatilla number four in rates of infection in their populations, and commissioners felt COVID "hot spots" like this should at least get their fair share of vaccines. Morrow County's high COVID infection rates are concentrated in the Boardman area among the Latino population, and the workers at the processing plants there. "Nobody has the per capita essential workers that Morrow and Umatilla have," Doherty pointed out, adding that Morrow County has the highest percentage minority population in the state of Oregon, a point others at the meeting hit on too. "We have been a year at this dealing with high numbers of positive numbers," Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said.

Malheur, Umatilla and Morrow counties are consistently in the top tier of infections percentages in the state, and Lindsay says the reason is the high number of essential workers in these counties processing food and "feeding the world." She wondered why, if these counties are so high on the infection list, they are not higher on the list for receiving vaccines, adding that they don't want more than their fair share, "We just want equity. We want our fair share. We are not only not getting our fair share, but the word we are getting (from the state) is we are diverting your share somewhere else."

How the 600 doses of vaccine would have been distributed within the county if delivered, was not discussed at the meeting. And whether Boardman, with its much higher rates of infection, would get higher numbers of vaccines than the south county area in the future, was also not discussed.

Ana Laura Pineyro, Communicable Disease and Emergency Preparedness Coordinator for the county, and an outreach person for the county to the Latino community, said the state should realize that minority populations are being underserved in inequitable vaccine distribution. "We have 970 cases in Morrow County and 550 of those are in the Hispanic population. Seventy percent of the cases in just 40 percent of the population. That is how bad it is in our community," she said of how hard the pandemic has hit the Boardman Hispanic population. Pineyro said the state should send the vaccine where it is most needed.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock was also in attendance at the meeting and was upset with the state's actions. "It is just so wrong. It's unconscionable. We have tried to be good soldiers following the guidelines from the governor, and every step of the way we seem to be in some different category," Murdock said. "We are the highest in terms of infections and the lowest in terms of vaccinations. We can vaccinate three thousand a week," he said.

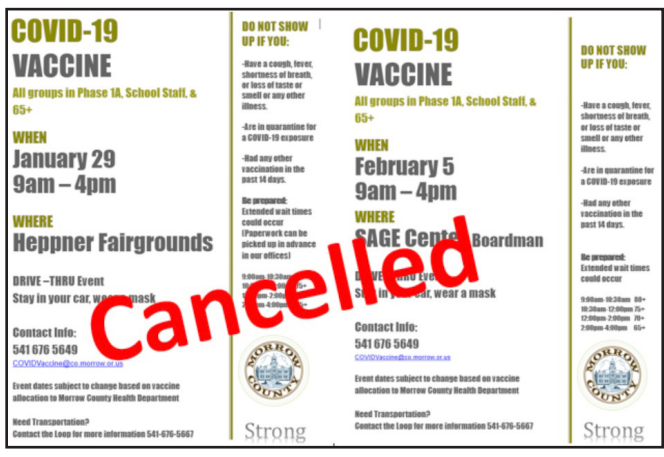
Murdock said everyone at the state level keeps talking about equity of distribution. "We keep hearing that the state is looking at everything through an equity lens, but I see no evidence of equity," he said. "I am told that we are all in this together and that we are all equal, but I am reminded of George Orwell's book, it's become apparent some Oregonians are more equal than others," Murdock said.

Local pharmacist John Murray was also at the meeting and said Morrow County doesn't need a lot of help, they just need the vaccine. "We need the vaccines. Public health has done a fantastic job. The Morrow County Health District is all ready to help, the pharmacy is ready to go. We have registered to give the shots; all the leg work has been done. It is truly just the vaccine," Murray says. "Give it to us; we will treat our own. We don't need the national guard, we can take care of our own," he urged.

State Representative Greg Smith was also at the meeting and said there comes a time when "enough is enough." "We try to keep politics out of health care, but it gets involved with everything and sadly it's involved with this," Smith said of the decision to divert the vaccine doses. "Sometimes you have to stand up and say enough is enough and let people know what you stand for and more importantly what you won't stand for. We need to make sure our voices are heard loud enough," he said.

Commissioner Don Russell was also frustrated by how the vaccine distribution had become politicized. "I try to not let politics get personal, but we are talking about getting an equitable share of a lifesaving vaccine and it is hard not to be personal when we are talking about a lifesaving vaccine for friends and relatives," he told the meeting. "To quote Dr. Fauci, the data doesn't lie. Russell says he looks at state data on the state website daily and sees who is getting vaccinated and who isn't. "Morrow and Umatilla county by OHA (Oregon Health Authority) data is on the lower end of vaccines per 10,000 people, and we are at the high end of positive COVID cases per 10,000 people," Russell points out. He says it is "super frustrating that we play by the rules in Morrow County and now we are being penalized for it." Russell said he thought the distribution process had become so politicized that the Governor's special interest groups were assured of getting the vaccine before other more rural areas of the state.

However, after an hour-long meeting commissioners did not seem any closer to finding a solution to what they feel is an inequitable distribution system by state government of the COVID vaccine. Smith had said he would try and help the commissioners arrange a meeting with the governor. Smith was in Salem as the legislature was in session at the time, and later that day he did write a letter to Governor Brown asking for a meeting. "I would like to formally request a virtual meeting with Governor Brown, myself, and the county commissioners of both Morrow and Umatilla counties. The purpose of this meeting will be to discuss vaccine distribution throughout District 57, focusing on Morrow and Umatilla counties," he wrote. However, as of Tuesday, Feb. 2 no meeting had as yet been set up.



Two COVID-19 vaccination events, one in Boardman and one at the Fairgrounds in Heppner were cancelled last week when the vaccine doses were 'diverted' somewhere else.

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