

Umatilla County changes staffers' schedules

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

After calling an emergency meeting on Monday, Umatilla County is restructuring the schedule of its staff in an attempt to further reduce the risks of spreading COVID-19.

For at least the next four weeks, staff of each county department have been split into two teams and will alternate between working at the office and having the week off at home.

"The goal is to minimize the amount of people and foot traffic in the building," said Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer.

The switch should reduce the risk of one staff member being infected with COVID-19 and exposing an entire department to it, Shafer said, and county staff will continue to be paid during their off weeks.

While working remotely would be ideal, Shafer said each employee's access to the internet and county programs necessary for their work differs at home and poses too many logistical challenges.

Shafer added that there are "no real changes" for the public, who may still access the county offices at the courthouse in Pendleton with an appointment.

The switch is planned for the next four weeks but is subject to change as any new information is made available or policies are enacted.

"Just like everyone else right now, we don't know what's coming down the pike next," Shafer said.

Radio series aims to inform Eastern Oregon's immigrant communities

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

In an effort to keep Eastern Oregon's immigrant communities informed about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, local Latino leaders and a grassroots organization recently launched a live Spanish radio series called Accion Rural Hispana.

"People still aren't aware of the social distancing guidelines in place or the true dangers of this disease," said Jose Garcia, the host of the series.

Garcia is hosting the series, which first aired March 29, in collaboration with Oregon Rural Action's Ana Elisa Wilson. The series will run at 11 a.m. Sundays during the show, La Voz Del

Pueblo, and will be broadcast on four Latino-owned stations between Boardman and Walla Walla, Washington, including Radio La Ley 101.1 FM.

Each week will feature an expert or community member to discuss public health, education, social services or other valuable information about the pandemic, such as social distancing guidelines, the elevated risks of those with underlying health conditions and how people can get the assistance they need.

The show's first guest, for example, was Dr. Ileana Maria Ponce-Gonzalez, who is the executive director of Community Health Worker Coalition for Migrants & Refugees. During her visit on the program, Ponce-Gon-

zalez addressed COVID-19 prevention methods and what to do when experiencing symptoms.

The series was birthed when Garcia, who is the chair of the Hermiston Hispanic Advisory Committee and the director of New Horizons drug and alcohol program, noticed the area's Spanish-speaking communities weren't aware of the state's orders and restrictions.

"My Anglo class was empty, but the Hispanics all showed up as the governor was announcing the state's stay in place rules ... when I went to pick up food at a restaurant, there were families coming in from working in the fields," Garcia said. "They didn't know they couldn't sit down to eat there."

In addition to providing information in Spanish, the radio series is aimed at providing greater access to information specifically for people working in the fields during the day.

"People working in the field get their information from the radio when they are working," Garcia said.

The show can also be accessed on mobile devices by calling 641-741-1016.

Wilson, who is a community organizer in Umatilla and Morrow counties for Oregon Rural Action, emphasized the show isn't just an opportunity for the area's immigrant communities to connect with information and resources.

Thanks to a call-in number, which is 509-579-0101,

listeners can also directly engage with and ask questions of leaders and experts.

According to a press release announcing the series, it's one part of a larger indigenous-language communications strategy being led by leaders like Garcia and Oregon Rural Action with the intent to raise public awareness among Latino communities in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

The strategy aims to disseminate information in Spanish through radio, television and social media with information from federal, state and local public health departments.

"The people are screaming for information," Wilson said. "They want to be informed."

Kayak Public Transit closure extended to April 11

HERMISTON HERALD

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation are extending the closure of Kayak Public Transit to April 11.

The tribes closed their bus services, including Hermiston's HART system, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. According to a news release, they will continue to monitor the situation and will make a determination about the following week on or before April 10.

The closure started on Monday, March 23.

"Kayak recognizes its role as a lifeline for access to employment, medical and shopping needs throughout the region and we do not take this action lightly," the release said.

If bus service resumes next week, it will likely continue with changes that were put in place before the closure began.

The HART has not

been stopping at Good Shepherd Medical Center, for example, because the campus is closed to visitors during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Whenever buses start rolling again, passengers are asked to refrain from riding if they have COVID-19 symptoms, such as cough or fever. They are also being encouraged to maintain proper social distancing as much as possible, including sitting at least 6 feet away from other people.

All buses are sanitized

at the end of each route.

Kayak Public Transit operates three fixed routes and four commuter bus services in Southeastern Washington and Northeastern Oregon, including La Grande, Hermiston and Walla Walla, Washington.

For more information, or to check if bus service has resumed, visit the Kayak Public Transit Facebook page, ctuir.org/tribal-services/planning/kayak-public-transit or call the dispatch line Monday through Friday at 541-429-7519.



HH file photo
A Kayak Public Transit bus picks up passengers in Pendleton in this file photo. The bus service is closed through at least April 11.

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