

COVID-19 numbers continue to climb

New workplaces added to outbreak list as Umatilla County announces seventh death

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Umatilla County's seventh COVID-19 death came just two days after its sixth, according to Umatilla County Public Health.

The department announced that an 83-year-old COVID-19 patient died at his residence on July 3. On July 1, a 93-year-old Umatilla County man with COVID-19 died at his residence. Both had underlying health conditions, according to the news release.

The county continues to see double-digit increases of new confirmed COVID-19 cases daily. As of July 7, Umatilla County had announced a total of 788 confirmed cases and on that date had 46 presumptive cases that were awaiting confirmation.

According to the health department, 332 people had recovered from the virus and there were 495 active cases when counting presumptive and confirmed. A presumptive case is defined as a person who has been in close contact with a confirmed case and is now showing symptoms, but has not received a test result to confirm or deny the diagnosis.

Twelve Umatilla County residents were hospitalized with COVID-19 as of July 7, down one from the record of 13 announced July 6.

The Oregon Health Authority announces an updated list of workplace outbreaks of COVID-19 in

the state each Wednesday. On July 1, a few new Umatilla and Morrow county worksites made the list, which only names worksites with at least 30 employees that have at least five cases linked to them.

Lamb Weston's Hermiston facility had the third-largest outbreak in the state, according to the list, with 73 cases that were linked to it, either through an employee getting sick or a close contact of a COVID-positive employee testing positive.

Spokeswoman Shelby Stoolman said in an email on July 2 that after Lamb Weston's first cases had emerged, the company conducted a testing event for their employees after closing down the plant. She said they were awaiting the remainder of the test results before determining when it would be safe to restart operations.

"All of our facilities operate under safety protocols that include health screening on arrival, required mask use on-site, and social distancing," she said. "We consistently review these protocols to ensure we're providing a safe work environment for our team members."

Hill Meat in Pendleton was added to OHA's list, as was Oregon Potato Company in Boardman and Columbia River Processing, a subsidiary of Tillamook Cheese in Boardman.

According to a statement by Tillamook, the cases are



A sign outside of Lamb Weston's Hermiston processing facility thanks the plant's employees. The potato processing facility has been linked to 73 COVID-19 cases.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

related to employees who tested positive for COVID-19 between June 16 and June 28. The company stated that three of those employees have already recovered and been cleared to return to work, while the rest are recovering at home. Those who are recovering at home or are quarantining after being identified as a close contact are receiving full pay and benefits.

The company indicated that employees have already been wearing masks and social distancing as much as possible, and will continue to do so. The factory has not been shut down.

"We are working closely with state and county health officials to keep them

apprised of these developments and they have affirmed that the protocols we have in place to prevent the spread of the virus reflect best industry practices," the company stated. "On June 17, OSHA, the Oregon Health Authority and the Oregon Department of Agriculture completed an on-site inspection at our Boardman facility and gave us their top rating and high praise for the measures we have in place to protect our workers. We have and will continue to put the health and safety of our employees, and the communities where (we) operate, as our highest priority."

Shearer's Foods was not listed on OHA's worksite

outbreaks for the week, but the company voluntarily sent out a news release on June 29 that six employees of its Hermiston plant had tested positive for COVID-19 and that all of those employees and close contacts of those employees had been sent home to quarantine with full pay.

Umatilla County's rising case numbers, and in particular its quickly rising hospitalizations, have landed the county, along with Morrow County, on the state's watchlist for counties that may have to go back under more stringent restrictions if things do not improve.

In his regular update to public officials in the county, Umatilla County

Commissioner George Murdock noted the county's contact tracers continue to trace a large number of cases back to people who went to work while sick. He stated that many of those people work in low wage jobs without much of a safety net to help them feel able to take several days off of work to quarantine if they are only experiencing mild symptoms.

The county health department continues to urge people to stay home from work if they are experiencing any symptoms of illness including a cough, fever, shortness of breath, sore throat, chills, diarrhea, vomiting, runny nose or a new loss of the sense of taste or smell.

Hermiston residents respond to Lopez letter

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Revelations this week that a viral, racist letter wasn't what it seemed have members of Hermiston's Latino community concerned about the repercussions.

On Monday, July 6, Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said former Umatilla County commissioner candidate Jonathan Lopez had admitted that he had penned the anonymous letter, which went viral on social media after Lopez claimed he had found it in his mailbox.

The letter stated in part that Lopez and other "Mexicans" were "not welcome here" and that "America is for the God fearing, pro gun, pro life humans who refuse to be controlled by the government." It included several racist, misogynistic and homophobic slurs.

"From the onset, this alleged incident has been thoroughly investigated," Edmiston wrote in an email. "Our investigation has shown that Mr. Lopez wrote the letter himself and made false statements to the police and on social media. The end result is a verbal and written admission by Mr. Lopez that the letter was fabricated."

He said the case would be forwarded to the Umatilla County District Attorney's office for review for initiating a false report, a Class A misdemeanor in Oregon.

Jazmin Yajaira Avalos, Anesat Leon-Guerrero and Heldáy de la Cruz, who described themselves as "members of Hermiston's Latinx community," penned a response to the revelations after the *East Oregonian* broke the news on July 6. In their response, they said they were "appalled" at Lopez's actions.

"We want to make it clear that a lot of our local and hometown voices have never stood with Lopez's politics and stances on issues within our community," they wrote. "In fact, a number of organizers and leaders began asking questions about Lopez's credi-

bility and intentions as red flags began to arise during his candidacy. The trust he was attempting to build was questionable from the beginning, and the news about this letter confirms what some of us believed to be true: Lopez was never fit to represent the Latinx community."



Lopez

They called on him to issue an apology and step down from any leadership positions. Lopez has been serving as a member of Hermiston's Hispanic Advisory Committee.

When contacted July 6, Lopez initially stated the issue was a big misunderstanding. He said he just meant to speak with Edmiston about racism in Umatilla County and use the letter as an example of the type of racism people experience, but often don't speak out about publicly.

"I never meant to file a report, it just kind of spiraled out," he said.

He also said he "never meant to mislead" the public.

When questioned further about his statements on Facebook that he had received the letter anonymously, and the fact he told a *Hermiston Herald* reporter on June 24 that he had found the letter in his mailbox when he got home, he confirmed he had told a police officer the same story.

After the story about Lopez's confession was posted online, a few people

"THE TIME SPENT ON THIS FICTITIOUS CLAIM MEANS TIME LOST ON OTHER MATTERS, NOT TO MENTION IT NEEDLESSLY ADDS TO THE INCREDIBLE TENSION THAT EXISTS IN OUR NATION TODAY."

Jason Edmiston, Hermiston police chief

who shared the *East Oregonian's* article on Facebook used it to cast doubt on previous statements by area residents participating in the Black Lives Matter movement that racism is a problem in Umatilla County.

When asked whether he was concerned about the incident causing people to not believe other stories of racism in the future, Lopez responded that "many people in many places are always going to have their opinion."

He said during his campaign for county commissioner he had experienced racist comments, including people accusing him of being an undocumented immigrant, and he had heard from other people who were afraid to speak up about racism they had experienced. He said thinking about those things was what had inspired him to write the letter to show what people in the area were experiencing.

The incident comes during a broader national discussion about racism, brought to light as people around the country protest systemic racism in law enforcement and other insti-

tutions. Hermiston is one of several Eastern Oregon communities that saw Black Lives Matter protests in June.

In their response to the letter, Yajaira Avalos, Leon-Guerrero and de la Cruz talked about the diversity of Umatilla County's communities of color, including Black and indigenous residents and immigrants from a long list of countries. They talked about the struggles those communities have faced and the integral ways they have contributed to the county.

"This is an opportunity for us to turn to the people and organizations doing the years of dedicated work, and empower our Latinx youth to continue this work that helps create a sense of belonging," they wrote. "Through authentic community engagement and empathy, we are all involved in the process of envisioning a future that inspires continued collaboration, community, and economic development for all."

Before the letter incident, Lopez ran for a seat on the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners during

the May 2020 primary and placed fourth.

Edmiston said his department was also forwarding information to the district attorney's office about possibly fraudulent statements in Lopez's entry in the May 2020 voter's guide about his background and education. Some of those claims were repeated in a *Hermiston Herald* article leading up

to the election.

Edmiston alleged that Lopez never served in the U.S. Coast Guard as stated, which would be a violation of the 2013 Stolen Valor Act.

"This investigation is particularly frustrating as we are in the midst of multiple major investigations while battling a resource shortage due to the current pandemic," Edmiston said. "The time spent on this fictitious claim means time lost on other matters, not to mention it needlessly adds to the incredible tension that exists in our nation today. As a lifelong resident of this diverse community, I'm disgusted someone would try to carelessly advance their personal ambitions at the risk of others."



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