

EDITOR'S DESK

Employers and individuals key to slowing COVID-19

As Umatilla County's COVID-19 numbers continue to grow by leaps and bounds compared to the rest of Oregon, I'm seeing a lot of arguing over how accurate the numbers are, and much less discussion about what we can do to protect people in our community.



Jade McDowell
NEWS EDITOR

Reducing COVID-19's toll on our community starts with personal responsibility, of course. All the laws and inspections in the world aren't going to make as much difference as the way individuals in a community are choosing to behave.

I said it in a column two months ago and I will say it again: If you want businesses in your town to be able to continue to operate, if you want schools to be able to open in the fall, if you want churches to stay open, you need to do your part by social distancing, wearing a mask and staying home when sick.

In the time since I first gave that advice in this column, it has been clear that many people in Hermiston have disregarded it. In mid-June, Umatilla County Public Health director Joe Fiumara said the county had traced many new COVID-19 cases to graduation parties. As cases have risen more rapidly, the health department has repeatedly stated that many cases are being traced back to people who infected their co-workers after knowingly showing up to work while sick. And when I went to a local laundromat last week after the state's mask order was already in effect, not a single other person inside was wearing a mask.

As easy as it is to judge, it is also



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan, file

A sign outside of Lamb Weston's Hermiston processing facility thanks the plant's employees.

important to remember that while some people are merely acting selfishly, others are making calculations that not everyone has been forced to make. For someone living paycheck to paycheck in a job with no paid sick leave, waking up with a sore throat may feel like a choice between risking their co-workers' health and not being able to put food on the table for their children.

That's not a decision we should be asking anyone to make.

I've been encouraged, as I have reported on workplace outbreaks, by how many companies have told me that they are providing paid sick leave not only for people who test positive for COVID-19 but also anyone who was exposed to them, so that they can protect others by quarantining at home.

This is the point of all that contact tracing and testing that has been set

up: to stop outbreaks in their tracks by depriving the virus of the opportunity to jump to new hosts.

It is vital that all workplaces in our community adopt generous COVID-19 paid leave policies immediately, along with practices, such as allowing people to work from home whenever possible and requiring masks when people are in the same room together.

If workplaces are currently one of the biggest drivers of Umatilla and Morrow counties' COVID-19 cases, then employers can do more to slow our numbers than anyone else. A paid sick day today can help avoid a complete shutdown tomorrow.

I'm hearing of people who are going to the grocery store or running other errands while they or members of their household have COVID-19, because they don't know how else to take care of things. If you know

someone who is sick or has sick family members, please consider reaching out and asking if there is anything you can drop off on their porch for them.

When it comes to masks, I am also hearing that some people are not wearing one because they do not have access to one, or a family is sharing one or two masks between all of them, meaning not everyone can be masked if they go out together.

Not everyone knows how to sew or has the money to purchase masks. But given how well people rose to the occasion when it was health care workers experiencing the shortage of PPE, I feel confident that Hermiston and surrounding communities can make sure that people who can't afford a mask will have access to one anyway.

Let's work together to help keep our communities safe.

COLUMN

Preparing for an abnormal school year

When I'm asked what the 2020-21 school year will look like, there are a lot of possible answers. "Normal" is not one of them.

The percentage and volume of positive coronavirus cases is higher in Oregon, and specifically Umatilla County, in the first weeks of July than it was in the entire month of March when the state required us to close our school doors.

At that time, our teachers and staff went above and beyond to continue delivering an education to our K-12 students, as well as laptops, internet access, and meals to those who needed them. It wasn't an ideal situation, but I'm proud to say the staff at Hermiston schools and our community partners made the best of it.

But despite those best efforts, we weren't able to maintain strong educational contact with many of our most vulnerable students. I would dare say no school district in the state felt the distance learning model is equal to in-classroom lessons for the majority of their students.

Working through the Department of Education's evolving guidelines for reopening make it clear that a usual fall schedule — regular K-12 classroom teach-

ing included — won't be possible. We have been given a set of rules at the state level and asked to make them work locally.

The bad news: Many of our most vulnerable students and families will be the most adversely affected by limited in-person engagement with teachers. Children who most need daily support, especially in the younger grades, are the hardest to reach through online education.

The good news: We're a community that's always up for a challenge, and has consistently supported local education, students and teachers. Whether it's cheering on the sidelines of sporting events, concerts and plays, pitching in support during fundraisers, or voting to build new schools to make room for new students, this Hermiston community has stepped up time and again.

That won't change even as our daily routines and structures shift. We know we can count on the support of this community to show patience and understanding as we thread the needle of state mandates and local needs.

Our goal is to safely return to five-day, on-site education for every student. It seems more likely that we will begin the school year in a hybrid format, where staggered schedules and prioritization of

younger grades will be in place. It is far easier to connect remotely with middle- and high-school students than elementary students.

We will continue to offer courses through Hermiston Online for students who wish to learn from home and make every effort to ensure technological access for students without.

It's in the best interest of this community for school to resume in full, as safely and soon as possible. Every hour of lost classroom time has a tangible impact on a student's academic prospects. We are at risk of severely damaging a generation of graduates — one of the state's top measures for success — if we can't keep up with benchmarks in reading, math, and science.

Schools are tasked with not only providing an education, but keeping children healthy. That includes providing a safe learning environment, ensuring clean facilities, and protecting the physical and mental health of our students.

For those reasons, we have to make sure we're doing what we can as a community to limit the exposure rate of COVID-19 and stay healthy. We owe it to our students and their future.

Tricia Mooney is the superintendent of Hermiston School District.



Tricia Mooney

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

People with disabilities have value

To the editor:
Thank you for your insightful and thoughtful editorial regarding ableism. Your column resembles recent conversations that I have had with my wife, Nancy Peterson, who is a disability activist and a retention specialist at a local college.

Through her work and personal life, Nancy encounters people who struggle. As she also lives with a set of disabilities that sometimes leaves her bedridden or puts her in the hospital, her work is taxing. She continues to work hard because she is caring, intelligent and devoted. Meanwhile, she encounters people who are sometimes themselves unaware of their own worth.

I am glad for people like you (and Nancy) who argue for the dignity of disabled individuals, just as I am happy for those people mentioned in your editorial, who know that it is right to invest in a ramp or accessible playground equipment. Such people also prioritize people with disabilities and chronic illnesses over the stock market.

I hope that, as we continue to suffer this awful pandemic, more and more people realize that sick people, old people and all disabled people are worthy. They are valuable for themselves, as they are also precious to the rest of society.

*Erick Peterson
Hermiston*

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No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. The Hermiston Herald reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content.

Letters must be original and signed by the writer or writers. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. Only the letter writer's name and city of residence will be published.

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