

## Supplies:

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Dominguez and more than two dozen other migrant farmworkers recently arrived at New Horizons, a nonprofit rehabilitation organization in Hermiston. That day, however, the facility grounds served a different purpose — to provide food, clothing and personal protective equipment to the workers.

“There’s no words to describe this,” Jose Garcia, chair of the Hispanic Advisory Committee in Hermiston, said as he looked out at the gathering workers.

In June 2020, Garcia recognized that because of the pandemic, farmworkers could not come get supplies from the Agape House, a local nonprofit food bank. So, he began working with the Agape House to reach out to the thousands of local Hispanic and Latino agricultural workers.

The workers carried boxes of bread, Raisin Bran, beans, rice, vacuum-sealed meats and fruits and vegetables to their cars. Dust from the work day still clung to their boots and jeans. Some brought their children, who played with belts, shirts and pants spilling out of stacked cardboard boxes, while parents checked sizes, laughed and chatted together. Nearly all came from Guatemala or Mexico.

Every two weeks, Agape House gives Garcia enough food and clothing for 120 families. In all, Agape House Executive Director Mark Gomolski estimates



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald  
Jose Garcia, left, and Rafael Romero, center, gather masks and hand sanitizer for a group of farmworkers at New Horizons in Hermiston on Friday, March 19, 2021.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald  
Jose Garcia hands out kits with hand sanitizer and masks to farmworkers at New Horizons, a nonprofit rehabilitation organization in Hermiston, on Friday, March 12, 2021.

they have provided supplies to approximately 4,800 people.

“It’s pretty amazing,” said Gomolski, who also serves as vice chair of the Hispanic Advisory Commit-

tee. “People are very, very grateful.”

Garcia, an addiction counselor at New Horizons, estimates between 20 to 30 families come by when supplies are offered at New

Horizons every two weeks. Workers are also provided with personal protective equipment supplied by the county health department.

It’s an effort to help a community that has been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Garcia says. In 2020, residents reporting Hispanic ethnicity accounted for 41% of Umatilla County’s total COVID-19 cases. The population also contracted the virus at a rate over three times higher than non-Hispanics, according to data from the county health department.

And Hermiston was hit hardest. The ZIP code encompassing the town

reported more COVID-19 cases than any other in the county in 2020. Most of those cases came in the summer, when the area reported one of the highest testing positivity rates in Oregon.

Residents reporting Hispanic ethnicity had the greatest number of Umatilla County’s cases in every month from April through August 2020. In July, the population tested positive at a rate nearly four-and-a-half times higher than non-Hispanics.

Health officials have said that the bulk of the cases during the summer months were being traced back to agricultural workplaces and food processing facilities, where infection has been known to spread rapidly and Oregon Health Authority frequently reported large outbreaks.

Researchers nationally have pointed to socioeconomic status and workplace exposures as having

## “FIFTEEN BOXES, 15 FAMILIES.”

Jose Garcia, chairman of the Hispanic Advisory Committee in Hermiston

contributed to the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on Hispanic and Latino communities.

Gov. Kate Brown announced in a Friday, March 22, press conference that migrant and seasonal farmworkers and food processing employees would be eligible to start receiving the COVID-19 vaccine start-

ing March 22, speeding up the state’s timeline as more groups of essential workers become eligible in the coming weeks. The move comes in response to the disparate affect the pandemic has had on essential workers in marginalized communities.

Officials at the Umatilla County health department have started contacting agricultural and food processing facilities to make plans for bringing the vaccine to these communities, according to Joe Fiumara, the county’s public health director.

And although infection rates have declined overall in the county, the pandemic has yet to fully abate from some agricultural areas.

Valentin Alonzo, who came to Hermiston from Guatemala nearly five years ago with his wife and three kids, said that five of his co-workers contracted the virus less than a month ago. Although Alonzo recognizes the severity of the virus, and the impact it’s had on local farmworkers, he said he is not worried.

“There is a passage in the Bible that says, if you come to me, don’t fear, because I will protect you from anything,” he said through a translator.

Garcia watched some of the last boxes of supplies be carried away, counting how many were once sitting on the tables. He uttered a phrase that would summarize the day.

“Fifteen boxes, 15 families.”

## Recovery:

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connecting people to a network of supportive people and to community resources for after they leave the center is crucial. They work with human services, Life-ways and other organizations to help “set people up for success” beyond the inpatient treatment phase.

“We do what we can to make sure their needs are met,” she said.

She and other staff said the pandemic has made some of that network-building more difficult. Family and friends have to video chat instead of visit in person to protect patients from COVID-19 exposure, for example, which doesn’t always have the same effect as in-person interactions.

Eryn Griffin, nursing superintendent at the detoxification center, said she saw people come through her doors last year who said a significant factor in their relapse was that NA and AA meetings and other support groups had stopped suddenly in the spring, and took a while to get going again virtually or in small groups outdoors.

“The isolation definitely played a huge role in a lot of peoples’ relapse,” she said.

Jokinen agreed, and said she was also concerned that the latest stimulus checks the federal government is paying out will prove too much of a temptation for some people to use the money to feed their addictions.

Darren Cole, executive director, said he can’t emphasize enough that if people want to overcome addiction, or want their loved ones to overcome addiction, they have to understand that having a support system during and after treatment is critical.

The road to recovery isn’t easy, but Jokinen pointed out that’s something EORC staff know well — many of them are in recovery themselves, and know exactly what it takes.

Rollins hopes to be one of those people someday. Once he reaches two years of sobriety, he hopes to work in addiction recovery in some way, perhaps as a motivational speaker.

For now, he’s focused on his newfound outlook on life.

“I got my self respect back, and my life back and my health back,” he said.



## Altrusa members clean up park



Cathy Lloyd/Contributed Photo  
Members of Altrusa International of Hermiston, left and above, help clean up and landscape Belt Park for a club service project on Saturday, March 20, 2021.

## COVID-19 vaccine eligibility moves up for many Oregonians

By GARY A. WARNER  
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

More than 1 million new people are being added early to the eligibility list for COVID-19 vaccinations, Gov. Kate Brown announced Friday, March 19.

The change means seasonal farm workers, food processing workers, adults over age 45 with qualifying underlying health conditions, pregnant women, homeless individuals, wildland firefighters and seniors in low-income or group housing in Umatilla and Morrow counties became eligible Monday, March 22.

President Joe Biden announced March 11 that he was directing states to lift all eligibility requirements for those 16 and older by May 1. Oregon had not planned on lifting all eligibility restrictions until July 1.

On Wednesday, March 17, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sent a directive to all states that the May 1 date for lifting restrictions was not optional. OHA Director Pat Allen told state lawmakers that day that the directive was “binding” and “regulatory,” with noncompliance possibly affecting the shipment of future doses of vaccine to the state.

Brown on March 19 ordered many of the 530,000

people covered in the next eligibility group moved up from Monday, March 29, to March 22. OHA Director Pat Allen told state lawmakers on March 17 that Brown was considering moving up the date as a way to get the groups at least a short head start before opening the eligibility to all.

Under Brown’s new timeline, vaccinations can begin for migrant and seasonal farmworkers and food processing workers in counties where they are currently working.

People age 45-64 with underlying health conditions can get vaccinated in counties that can attest they have “largely” vaccinated those age 65 and older — something Umatilla and Morrow counties have both done.

Another 550,000 people who were to be eligible on May 1 have had their start date moved to April 19. Those categories include frontline workers as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, families in multigenerational households, and individuals age 16-44 with underlying conditions.

Vaccine providers have been told to use an honor system for determining who should get the shots. OHA has published a list of medical conditions that meet the standard. Those seeking the vaccination

will not be asked to provide medical records or a doctor’s note, but will be asked to attest that they meet the guidelines.

Morrow County Health Department reacted quickly to the updated timeline, announcing new vaccine clinics for farmworkers and food processing workers in the county. Those will take place at the Sage Center in Boardman on Wednesday,

March 24, from 1-8 p.m.; Thursday, March 25 from noon to 7 p.m.; Friday, March 26 from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., and Saturday, March 27 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Call 541-481-4200 to make an appointment.

In Umatilla County, vaccines continue to be available through Umatilla County Public Health, Good Shepherd Medical Center, Mirasol Fam-

ily Health Center, Family Health Associates, Safeway, Walmart, BiMart, Yellowhawk Tribal Center, and other locations. Family Health Associates is advertising a walk-in clinic at Umatilla High School on Friday, April 2, from 3-7 p.m. for eligible individuals.

News Editor Jade McDowell contributed to this report.

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