

Shortage:

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“These people were all making benefits — these people all made that decision to go away from benefits and get back in the (labor) market,” McConnell said. “This last group of people, what do we do for them, and why are they out of the workforce?”

Across the region, unemployment claims recovered lower than their pre-pandemic levels in February 2020, before government shutdowns halted the economy. The Oregon Employment Department reported the number of unemployment claims for Eastern Oregon for May was 1,468. In February 2020, before the pandemic, that number was 1,605.

Only 136 of those claims come from unemployed service industry workers — representing 9.26% of those receiving benefits. For Union County, that number of claimants was 19, while Umatilla and Baker counties

had 56 and 19, respectively. The majority of continued claims, from all Eastern Oregon counties, came from the construction, agriculture and production industries.

According to Oregon Employment Department data, the leisure and hospitality industry saw a significant chunk of workers leave the field altogether over the course of the pandemic. Many, it seems, were able to find work in their professional careers — ones that matched their college degrees or training.

That economic theory is backed up anecdotally. The Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association polled a number of restaurants across the state. Out of the dozens of responses that were published, approximately 20% mentioned employees not returning because they had found or were looking for a career change.

“There were a number of individuals that switched industries during the early part of the pandemic when it became clear that it was a crisis that was not going to resolve quickly,” wrote Cari



Alex Wittwer/For the Hermiston Herald

Lupe Delgado, the sous chef at Nookie's Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston, works through orders during the business' rush hour June 26, 2021. Delgado and head chef Trevor Olsen have worked overtime for months following the sudden departure of the previous head chef at the restaurant, and have struggled to find workers to fill the vacancies at the business.

Shafer of Oxford Suites in Pendleton to the restaurant association on March 17, 2021.

Other factors

“There's not just one thing going on right now,” said Chris Rich, the state's regional economist for Eastern Oregon. “There's a bunch of different pieces that contribute to what we would really term more of

a tight labor market than a labor shortage.”

One of those factors has been a problem in Oregon for several years.

“The big one that everyone points to right now is actually child care,” McConnell said. “They've had a lot of closures of child care places permanently. It's not so easy to take an economy, shut it down and then just expect it to wake back up.”

Delta:

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nearly 33% of residents are vaccinated — has reported some of the highest daily case counts statewide in recent weeks. From July 6 to July 9, Umatilla County reported 67 cases. And since mid-June, the county has reported at least 260 cases, according to county health data.

“We're actually curious to know if this uptick in cases is due to the delta variant,” Messer said. “I would be very surprised if it wasn't.”

What you need to know about delta

The delta variant, first identified in India in December 2020, is the most “fit” variant of all coronavirus mutations, experts say. All viruses mutate, and as they do, they become better adapted to latch onto a host.

But many experts say vaccinated people don't need to fear the variant.

Early research suggests the delta variant is 50% more transmissible than the alpha variant, a strain out of the United Kingdom that is 50% more transmissible than the original coronavirus strain from Wuhan, China. That means the variant is two to three times as transmissible as the original strain.

The delta variant has now spread to 96 countries. In India and Britain, two of the first countries to report the delta variant, 90% of current COVID-19 cases are delta variants, according to the New York Times. The spike has prompted leaders worldwide to reinstate stay-at-home orders and restrictions on public gatherings, outdoor dining and other practices to prevent outbreaks.

And because of the uptick, the World Health Organization is encouraging residents, including those who have

been vaccinated, to wear masks in public until vaccination rates increase and COVID-19 cases decrease.

The variant now accounts for roughly one in every four infections in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, the CDC maintains that people who have been vaccinated against COVID-19 need not wear masks.

Experts say it still is too early to tell for sure if the variant creates more severe symptoms, though the strain's arrival in places such as Los Angeles County led to increased hospitalizations and prompted the health department to recommend even vaccinated residents to don facial protection.

The variant is hitting unvaccinated areas of the country particularly hard, including some southern states. That's what has some health experts worried about Eastern Oregon, where three

of the state's five least-vaccinated counties are.

But now that Oregon lifted its pandemic restrictions last week, health officials are growing increasingly concerned cases will rise once again as the masks come off and large summer events are underway.

“I want to be optimistic that everyone's learned a lot from this last year, and that will help to prevent the spread of illness,” said Alisha Lundgren, deputy director for Umatilla County Public Health. “But even if restrictions have started to loosen, COVID has gone up in our community.”

Lundgren said the number of cases being traced back to social gatherings has recently increased.

“That's the first time we've seen that since the shutdowns because hardly anyone was having gatherings,” she said. “That's on the rise, and I think what's going to be tricky, and it will

A January 2019 report from Oregon State University found much of Oregon remains a child care desert, meaning there were three children for every available slot at child care centers.

According to a report from the Oregon Employment Department, nearly 40% of the Oregon labor force has children at home, and with the inability to find adequate child care, that has left 17%, or roughly 350,000 workers, in a bind.

Some economists say that labor shortages are simply wage shortages. This led Mitch Myers, owner of Nookie's, to offer generous incentives to prospective employees.

“I'm having to pay a \$1,000 hiring bonus to 17-year-old kids, who don't even have a driver's license, with no work experience, and paying \$18.50 an hour,” he said. “And you know what happens? You hire them, they work one day and quit.”

Structural changes

McConnell said the pandemic caused a great struc-

tural shift in the economy that pulled workers out of the labor force entirely, though data on this remains scarce.

“My hunch is that the majority of the 761 people (in Union County) have structural adjustment issues,” said McConnell, “such as child care availability. Many of them may also be unwilling to lose Medicare benefits. By moving back into the workforce, they will lose access to care. This economic crisis is highlighted by the significant lack of affordable health coverage in the economic system right now.”

McConnell also said the federal unemployment benefits kicker amounts to \$2.7 million in Union County alone between July 1 and Sept. 4, when the benefits are expected to end. But ending them early, he said, would be a mistake.

“So you may add more incentive to look for work,” he said. “But in the meantime, you're actually going to take a lot of money out of the system, which may actually depress the economy.”

be good to watch the variant data, but the other component that's in place for our case numbers over the next month is, everything's open again.”

Vaccines and delta

Experts agree all of the available vaccines offer protection against the variant. A study by Public Health England showed the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine is 88% effective in eliminating the risk of getting the delta variant of COVID-19. In early studies, the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines have shown to be effective against the variant as well.

Like all vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines do not offer perfect immunity against the virus, and there is some preliminary evidence that the delta variant is better able to evade the vaccine's protection. Even so, breakthrough cases are extremely rare, experts say, and vaccinated people still have bet-

ter protection against delta are less likely to contract a severe case.

“We do know that if you're fully vaccinated and you do get the virus, your immune system is already ready for it,” Hitzman said. “So even if you do get infected, you won't get as sick.”

He also said there are “hardcore people out there who do not want to get vaccinated,” yet the vaccine is “the only thing that we've got to fight against it right now.”

With Umatilla County having reopened, and with cases gradually increasing, Lundgren said she's monitoring the situation with caution.

“This is the moment where we ask what's going to happen now that everything's open,” she said. “And certainly having the delta variant get out very aggressively in our community would not help.”

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