



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

**Tracy Wart, an infection prevention nurse at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, draws up a dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during the hospital's first round of staff vaccinations on Dec. 28, 2020.**

## Crisis in the making?

By **BRYCE DOLE**  
EO Media

Eastern Oregon's health care system could see a mass exodus of workers come Oct. 18, the deadline for Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

More than a quarter of all health care workers in Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties remain unvaccinated, according to the Oregon Health Authority. All would be fired or forced to resign under the mandate.

"It's like a big game of chicken," said Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County's public health officer. "Who's going to relent first?"

Hospitals across the three counties say they are working to comply with the mandate, but none would disclose any specific plans for how they would adjust or alter operations if there is a shortage of workers.

"We understand this new requirement has been welcomed by some and has caused great concern for others," said Mardi Ford, spokesperson for Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande. "While we value every one of our employees and support their right to make that choice; as a private, not-for-profit Critical Access Hospital, we must follow this government directive to continue caring for our community. We do not want to lose a single member of our team."

Regional hospital officials in recent months have said they already were struggling with a shortage of workers. Staff have said they are exhausted after the delta variant ripped through the region, hospitalizing large swaths of unvaccinated people. In Umatilla County, the unvaccinated have accounted for about 49 out of every 50 hospitalizations this year, according to county data.

Hitzman said he's concerned a mass layoff would only exacerbate the problems the health care system is facing during the latest pandemic surge.

"It's going to have a massive impact on the system," said Hitzman, a vocal vaccine proponent who is opposed to the mandate. "We're already all stretched thin. If you happen to get into an automobile accident, you have to hope that they have a bed for you in the hospital. If I have a heart attack, are they going to have a bed for me in the hospital? Are they going to have a nursing staff to care for me?"

### Hospitals mum on contingency plans

CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton reported 30% of its health care workers remain unvaccinated. Harold Geller, the president of CHI St. Anthony, said the hospital is working on contingency plans for the mid-October deadline.

"As is true for most hospitals, we are concerned about the number of staff electing not to become vaccinated," Geller said. "Our entire staff is committed to providing high quality care as safely as possible. They've done a terrific job throughout the past year and a half. Each staff member is putting serious thought into this matter and it is our hope that we retain all staff."

Caitlin Cozad, a spokesperson for Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston, said the hospital has "contingency plans in place to remain fully operational" and is "ensuring we have adequate staffing to meet the needs of our community." She added the hospital is "on track to be fully com-

pliant with the state mandate." Neither Ford nor Cozad would disclose how many of their health care workers are vaccinated.

But state data shows in Umatilla County, 36% of health care workers remain unvaccinated. In Union County, that number is 26%. In Morrow County, it's 28%.

Kevin Mealy, a spokesperson for the Oregon Nurses Association, said in a written statement the union is calling upon "all nurses and health care workers to get vaccinated before the Oct. 18 deadline or to fill out the necessary paperwork for a medical or deeply held religious belief exception."

If they don't, they could be fired.

"Losing even one nurse from a patient's bedside will deepen Oregon's nurse staffing crisis and endanger community health," Mealy said. "ONA expects hospital and health care system CEOs to follow federal labor law and sit down with nurses to bargain the impact of workplace vaccination policies and find ways at-risk health care workers can continue contributing during the surge."

### Cases increase among hospital staff

Good Shepherd from July 21 to Sept. 15 reported 54 COVID-19 cases among staff, according to state data. Grande Ronde's staff from July 15 to Sept. 1 had 35 cases. And staff at CHI St. Anthony from Aug. 19 and Sept. 3 had 10 cases.

Several hospitals say they have seen an increase in vaccinations among health care workers since the mandate was announced.

The vaccine mandate came in response to the rapidly rising number of COVID-19 cases statewide as the delta variant surge filled Oregon's hospitals almost entirely with unvaccinated people. To curb the spread, Brown announced the mandate for health care workers and teachers in August, when infection was at its peak.

But Hitzman said he believes the state is pushing the region's health care system into a lose-lose situation. He said health care workers should get vaccinated because they work around sick patients, but added those who have built their careers in the field may have little to fall back on.

"What are they going to do, just change professions?" he said, adding, "For most of us, we've been deeply ingrained in our professions. It's not like we can just go do something else ... It's going to create financial hardship for those individuals."

In addition, he said the deadline falls at an especially critical time for Umatilla County. Two weeks ago, tens of thousands of people flooded into the county for the Pendleton Round-Up, an event where most people were maskless and there was no proof of vaccination or negative COVID-19 test required.

Health care workers for months have voiced concerns about the potential for infection to increase after this event. Hitzman noted if a surge were to occur, it would be within two to three weeks of the event — right around when the mid-October vaccine deadline occurs.

"We'll see what the numbers are over the next two to three weeks," Hitzman said. "But if we see a major spike, I'm not going to be surprised. I'm going to breathe a sigh of relief if we don't."



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