

Oregon has new mask, school and vaccine verification actions to fight COVID-19

'We've been able to turn back the tsunami of infection,' OHA director says

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

No more masks outdoors, new COVID-19 quarantine protocols and testing in schools and a vaccination verification system were announced by state health and education officials Tuesday, Nov. 30.

In a wide-ranging press call, Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said there was reason for optimism with the seven-day average of new cases at 822 on Nov. 30, down from well above 2,000 around Labor Day.

"We've been able to turn back the tsunami of infection," Allen said.

But the state would not give a firm timeline for lifting other restrictions or when the state might return to something close to "normal."

"The delta-dominated COVID-19 world is really unpredictable," Allen said.

Allen said the state was moving more cautiously after it was blindsided by the delta variant last summer.

Gov. Kate Brown and health officials last June announced the COVID-19 crisis was ebbing due to higher vaccination rates.

But the delta variant swept into Oregon and sent infections, hospitalizations and deaths to new record highs.

The delta spike taught officials to refrain from setting metrics that would indicate a defeat of COVID-19 and repeat the false expectations of last summer's pre-delta decline.

"We don't have an exact number at OHA that we are keeping secret," Allen said.

Indoor mask-wearing requirements will stay in place through the end of the year.

Outdoor masks

Allen said a steady drop in new infections over the past month allowed for a lifting of Oregon's order mandating masks in large public gatherings outdoors.

The rule is lifted immediately. School districts and other educational programs can still require outdoor masking if they wish, Allen said.

School 'test to stay' program

Department of Education Director Colt Gill announced a new quarantine protocol the state hopes will cut down on time away from school for students who might be exposed to the virus.

The "test to stay" plan will use fast antigen tests already available to about 70% of schools in the state for a new quarantine protocol.

Currently, unvaccinated students have to stay home up to two weeks after close contact with someone infected with COVID-19.

Under the new plan, students would be tested soon after the exposure and then again about five to seven days later. As long as they test negative, students can attend school, including extracurricular activities. They are expected to

strictly quarantine before and after the school day.

Gill said school districts should work with local health authorities in setting up the protocol.

"We really think this will be a turn around for our students, families and educators," Gill said.

Vaccination verification

Allen confirmed the state is working to create a system that would allow venues requiring proof of vaccination to more easily check records. Some conservatives have denounced the proposal.

Rep. E. Werner Reschke, R-Klamath Falls, said Nov. 29 he believed the state would use any system for wider purposes.

"The Digital Vaccine Records (aka passport) being developed by OHA Oregon will NOT only be for vaccines," Reschke wrote on Twitter. "The Communists in State government will find other ways to use it to make you obey their whims."

Allen said the program would not involve any state mandates, but streamline the ability of businesses, such as the Portland Trailblazers, that have vaccination requirements for venues to verify vaccination status.

Because of concerns over equity, the state is creating a paper version that can be obtained by farmworkers, homeless people and others who may not be able to access digital systems.

Rising case numbers nationwide

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state epidemiologist, noted that 30 states have reported an increase in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks. The upswing may be due to people gathering indoors more often due to colder weather in the northern and Rocky Mountain states.

It's too early to know if Oregon will follow the same path. Sidelinger urged Oregonians to get their shots and avoid the prolonged severe cases of infection and death that are overwhelmingly tied to those who are unvaccinated. He also urged people to get a booster shot, especially those who are older than 50, live in congregate settings or have health issues that make them more susceptible to infection.

"The more we can get vaccine into arms, the better," Sidelinger said.


Pandemic anniversary

The world prepares to mark the two-year anniversary of the discovery of the COVID-19 virus in China at the very end of 2019.

More than 4.2 billion people around the globe have received a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, about 55% of the world population.

Oregon on Nov. 29 passed 5,000 deaths from COVID-19 since February 2020. The United States is set to pass 775,000 known COVID-19 deaths, making it the biggest pandemic killer in the nation's history.

The Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation projects over 880,000 deaths in the U.S. by March 1. Oregon is forecast to top 6,400 deaths by that date.



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