

# 'Please donate blood. Now'

## National blood shortage felt locally

By ALEX WITTWER  
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Blood doesn't last long. Platelets last only five days, according to the American Red Cross, while red blood cells will last up to 42 days. Plasma can last up to one year if frozen. Nor can blood be manufactured; the supply of blood relies entirely on donors rolling up their sleeves.

The American Red Cross, which held a nationwide blood drive in January including several blood donation stations in Eastern Oregon, reports it is facing a blood crisis. The organization's website stated its blood supply is at the lowest levels in more than a decade. The alarm was sounded last month during National Blood Donor month.

"While some types of medical care can wait, others can't," said Dr. Pampee Young, chief medical officer of the Red Cross. "Hospitals are still seeing accident victims, cancer patients, those with blood disorders, like sickle cell disease, and individuals who are seriously ill who all need blood transfusions to live even as omicron cases surge across the country. We're doing everything we can to increase blood donations to ensure every patient can receive medical treatments without delay. We cannot do it without more donors. We need the help of the American people."

### Local hospitals react to shortage

The national blood shortage has hit uneven ground in Eastern Oregon, with area hospitals reporting their blood supply falling below critical levels.

Most hospitals are handling it well, given the circumstances, while others have begun to feel the effects. Most blood that is donated goes to local hospitals, according to Caitlin Cozad, marketing and communications director for Good Shepherd Health Care System, Hermiston.

"Community support of American Red Cross blood drives is essential to return our blood supply to pre-COVID minimum stocking numbers," she said. "We especially need O-negative donors. This is one way



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

**Jake Yoste, a phlebotomy technician with the American Red Cross, explains the blood donation process to Elena Nightingale at the community blood drive Jan. 25, 2022, at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in La Grande. The Red Cross reports its blood supply is the lowest in more than a decade.**

you can serve your community and help ensure a stable blood supply for local hospitals."

It is unclear to what degree the pandemic has affected the amount of blood donations. Some areas, such as La Grande and Baker City, have experienced an uptick in donations this year in comparison to other areas in the region. Still, the American Red Cross noted that nationwide blood donations have gone down 10% since the beginning of the pandemic.

"We have experienced critical blood supply issues in the past months. We have had no units of O-negative on the shelf two times and zero O-positive one time," said Ronda Reisdorph, a laboratory manager at Hermiston's Good Shepherd Medical Center. "We have been running with less than minimum thresholds in the past few months and no chance for restocking even with emergent cases."

While the medical center expects to receive an increased supply over the coming weeks to supplement its stockpile due, there's no indication that the national blood shortage will improve in the near future.

The American Red Cross supplies approximately 40% of the nation's blood supply, according to the organization, and some hospitals might receive as little as 25% of their requested blood supplies in the coming weeks. Hospitals normally keep a steady supply of blood for routine procedures but can request more in the event of a mass casualty or injury event.

Since much of the blood that arrives in hospitals comes from the arms of local community members, due to the large turnout for Union County blood drives, some local hospitals have fared better in the national crisis.

Mardi Ford, director of communications at Grande

Ronde Hospital, La Grande, credited the work of husband and wife duo Linda and Sheldon Strand, who run La Grande's American Red Cross blood drives, as a key factor in ensuring Grande Ronde Hospital has an adequate blood supply. Ford said the hospital works closely with the American Red Cross and has an internal system that is used to track blood supply levels.

Ford said the hospital has only had a couple of instances in the past few years where blood supplies reached critical levels.

"We are proactive in making sure that we have what we need to serve our patients," she said. "That's one of the beauties of being small and independent. We have options on how we're able to do things."

Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Enterprise, recently received shipments where the requested blood supply was not provided.

"Fortunately, we work with the Red Cross on a

blood rotation to keep us at optimal levels and have held on to a supply of the shorted products," said Brooke Pace, director of communications and public relations. "We do this to ensure that nothing is wasted because of outdated. We can still transfer units to regional hospitals in our area if dating becomes a concern."

Stefanie Davidson, Wallowa Memorial Hospital's lab director, urged residents to donate blood amid the growing national shortage, even as local supplies remain steady.

"Even though we still have an above critical supply, the national shortage is a concern, and we would like to encourage anyone who can to get out and donate," she said.

Pendleton's CHI St. Anthony Hospital fared better than other hospitals in the region, according to the hospital's president, Harry Geller, who noted the hospital was well stocked.

"There is always a con-

cern, pandemic or not," he said. "We here at St. Anthony have taken steps to be prepared as best as possible."

Even still, the hospital president did not mince words about the national shortage.

"Please donate blood," he said. "Now."

### Changing the rules

The blood crisis also has renewed an effort by lawmakers to change the rules regarding donations by those in the LGBT community.

Senators from across the nation signed a letter on Jan. 14 urging the Food and Drug Administration to change the rules to allow men in same-sex relationships to donate blood. In total, 22 senators signed their names to the letter, including Democratic Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

"In light of the nation's urgent blood supply crisis and to ensure that Americans have access to life-saving blood transfusions during the pandemic, we urge you to swiftly update your current blood donor deferral policies in favor of ones that are grounded in science, based on individualized risk factors, and allow all potentially eligible donors to do so free of stigma," the senators wrote Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra and FDA Acting Commissioner Janet Woodcock.

In 1983, the federal government placed a lifetime ban on gay men from donating blood, at the height of the HIV/AIDS scares of the 1980s. Those rules were relaxed in 2015 by requiring one year of abstinence, and then reduced further to three months in 2020.

The letter noted that advances in testing technologies would allow for gay and bisexual men to safely donate blood, and criticized the time-based guidelines that perpetuates stereotypes.

"It is critical that all patients have access to the health care services they need during this pandemic, and for many, the availability of blood and blood products is a necessary component of care," the letter said. "Unfortunately, a significant drop in the number of donations during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a serious shortage of available blood."

## Oregon Health Authority will lift its indoor mask requirements by March 31

Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon Health Authority announced Monday that it will lift the state's indoor mask mandate by March 31.

State health leaders expect that by late March, Oregon's COVID-19 hospitalizations will taper off to about 400 or fewer. That's the level the state recorded before the omicron variant began to spread.

"The evidence from Oregon and around the country is clear: masks save lives by slowing the spread of COVID-19," said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's epidemiologist. "We should see COVID-19 hospitalizations drop by the end of March because so many Oregonians are wearing masks and taking other steps to protect themselves and each other, such as getting a booster shot or vaccinating their children. At that point, it will be safer to lift mask requirements."

Indoor mask requirements will remain in place until further notice for now, as COVID-19 hospitalizations continue to strain the state's hospital system.

A new rule was filed Monday by the OHA with



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald, File

**A Stanfield senior poses in his Oregon State University Beavers mask and dollar bill lei before commencement ceremonies on May 29, 2021.**

the Oregon Secretary of State to keep the state's indoor mask requirement in place, replacing a temporary rule that was set to expire Feb. 8. The new rule allowed health officials to extend the current restrictions past their temporary expiration date until no longer needed, OHA said.

Oregon's average number of newly diagnosed cases has dropped about 40% over the past week, according to the OHA. Despite that, hospitaliza-

tions have remained above 1,000 per day.

OHA said Oregon has the "third lowest cumulative COVID-19 case rate in the nation and the seventh lowest COVID-19 death rate" since the start of the pandemic. In a filing with the secretary of state Monday, Oregon health officials said scientific research has shown that masks protect people from COVID-19, and the state's overall compliance with mask rules, combined with a high vac-

cination rate, has blunted the omicron surge and prevented a meltdown of Oregon's hospital system, at least for now. According to Oregon Health & Science University data, more than eight in 10 Oregonians report continuing to wear masks in public.

That has helped Oregon prevent topping the 1,178 hospitalizations recorded during the peak of the delta variant surge, despite initial hospitalization projections the state received.

## Hermiston transport programs see some drops and increases in 2021

Hermiston Herald

Ridership in Hermiston's Senior & Disabled Taxi Program declined in 2021 while its Workforce On-Demand Ride Cooperative program saw a slight increase in its second full calendar year of operation.

The Senior & Disabled Taxi Program provides service for eligible Hermiston residents to locations within city limits. According to a press release Monday, Feb. 7, from the city, Between 2017-19 the program averaged 18,000-20,000 rides per year, but that fell in 2021 to 12,191 rides.

The service has primarily been used for trips to medical appointments, shopping, public events and gatherings.

"The past couple of years have disrupted people's regular routines due to cancelled appointments and events, and that seems to be having an impact on how many people are using the taxi service," Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said in the release. "We know that routine and familiarity are important in helping people choose to use a public transit option like the taxi

service, so we want to help remind folks that this easy and reliable system is here to help."

Vouchers for the program are \$2.50 each and are available for purchase at Hermiston City Hall.

Residents who are 60 years or older or have an eligible disability under Social Security, the Public Employee Retirement System or other recognized agency may apply.

The city also reported its WORC program issued 7,041 ride vouchers in 2021, a slight increase from the 7,020 issued in 2020. The majority of these rides — 62% — were within Hermiston city limits with many users getting rides to service-sector and retail workplaces.

The program offers rides to workplaces in Hermiston, Umatilla or Stanfield and ticket pricing is based on distance between the worksite and pickup/drop off location.

For more information about the city of Hermiston's transit options, including taxi service and the fixed-route HART bus service, visit [www.hermiston.or.us/transit](http://www.hermiston.or.us/transit).