

Media briefing (April 16, 2021)

Patrick Allen, Director, Oregon Health Authority:

Before I provide a brief update on vaccinations, I want to recognize the fact that vaccinations in Oregon have not been administered as equitably as they need to be.

The numbers are stark and clear. For too many people, race and income are predictors of whether you can access to a COVID-19 vaccine – or not.

Yesterday, I heard the leaders of organizations who serve the Latino/Latina community voice their legitimate frustration at the inequitable disparity in vaccination rates for the Latino community. I share their frustration.

As a state, we can and need to do better. We've pursued a strategy to close these gaps in a variety of ways:

- We prioritized vaccines to Federally Qualified Health Centers that serve a disproportionate population of Latino patients and opened eligibility to everyone they serve, regardless of age, occupation or underlying health condition.
- We prioritized doses for migrant and seasonal farmworkers who have experienced some of the largest outbreaks in the state.
- We've conducted intensive outreach across the state through our Community Partner Outreach Program and worked with more than 170 community-based organizations to inform and engage the community through co-produced outreach materials in 11 languages.
- We've provided more than \$17 million in grants to CBOs for vaccine-focused outreach, in addition to more than \$56 million in grants to non-profits to address health equity.

But these strategies haven't been enough. The under-vaccination of the Latino community continues to be a profound shortcoming in our state COVID-19 response.

OHA and our partners need to do more. As I've said since the outset of this vaccination effort, if we only prioritize the speed of our roll-out, many people will get left behind.

High throughput vaccination clinics like the Salem Fairgrounds and the Oregon Convention Center have been important tools. But they're not sufficient.

We need to refocus, re-imagine and re-deploy our efforts to get vaccines out into communities that are hardest hit and most at risk. That takes time to build relationships, win trust and be there at the right place and time in the community when someone makes the decision to get vaccinated.

I'm committed to working with leaders in the Latino/Latina community to redress the disparities in our vaccination rates. I'm committed to making sure our health care system and our vaccination efforts do a better job at serving people of color and eliminating health disparities.

I look forward to working with community leaders to address their recommendations and ensure everyone in Oregon has fair access to vaccines.

Now, as we prepare to open vaccine eligibility to all Oregonians who are 16 and older, here's a quick overview on the progress of our vaccination efforts.

- **More than 1.5 million Oregonians have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine:** As of yesterday, the total was 1,516,589.
 - 37% of Oregonians have received at least one shot.
 - 42% of the population 16 and older have received at least one shot.
- **Nearly 1 million Oregonians are fully vaccinated:**
 - Oregon has completed full 2-dose vaccinations – or single dose Johnson & Johnson vaccines – for 966,834 people.
 - Overall, 23% of Oregonians have been fully vaccinated.
- **The capacity of Oregon vaccination sites to immunize Oregonians continues to increase:**
 - As of yesterday, Oregon is averaging 38,728 doses administered each day.
- **Nearly 3 in 4 seniors have been vaccinated.**
 - As of yesterday, 765,542 people who are 65 and older have received at least one shot.

Let me give you a brief update on our projected vaccine supplies. As you know, this week saw a pause in the distribution of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. This pause is evidence that the precautions that are in place to ensure vaccine safety are working to protect people against adverse events.

No matter the outcome of the evidence review, we know it will be based on the best available science.

In the meantime, the loss of Johnson & Johnson continues to put curbs on the pace of our roll-out.

- Previously, we expected the Johnson & Johnson manufacturing shortfall would result in about an 8- or 9-day setback in having enough doses to vaccinate all eligible Oregonians.
 - Now, we're holding off on our projections of Johnson & Johnson vaccines for the next month, until we know more.
 - That continued shortfall means as many as 70,000 fewer vaccine doses per week.
- For the week of April 19, we are expecting 154,000 prime doses.
 - That's consistent with what we are receiving this week and does not include Johnson & Johnson doses.
 - For the week of April 26, we do expect a similar amount of prime doses
 - Until we receive clarity on when Johnson & Johnson shipments will begin, we would expect to see approximately 154,000 prime doses per week into early May.

What do these temporary supply limitations mean for Oregonians who are looking for a vaccination?

- We'll continue to see tight appointment availability in many parts of the state for the coming weeks, at least until we know more about the availability of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.
- However, we still expect to have enough doses to vaccinate all Oregonians who are 16 or older before summer.
- And as Dr. Sidelinger will describe, it's vital for every Oregonian to get vaccinated.

Now let me turn it over to Dr. Sidelinger.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger:

I want to begin today by summarizing where things stand with the pandemic in Oregon and follow that with an urgent plea for every eligible Oregonian to get vaccinated.

As of today, OHA has reported 173,626 COVID-19 cases in Oregon.

But recent data are troubling showing that virus is again on the march throughout our state sickening our friends and neighbors.

Daily cases, hospitalizations, our positive test rate and, sadly, COVID-19 deaths, are ALL on the upswing.

- Daily cases of COVID-19 have more than doubled in just over a month, increasing from a 7-day moving average of 249 on March 6, to a daily average of 595 cases!
- Over the past two days, OHA has reported 1,576 new cases, the highest two-day total since early February.
- In our most recent report covering the week of April 5 through April 11, OHA reported 3,722 new cases. That is 26% higher than the previous week. And that week was 21% higher than the one before that.

In fact, we have seen 20-plus percent increases in our cases for three weeks running – eclipsing even the most pessimistic scenario in our most recent COVID-19 modeling.

The percentage of positive COVID-19 tests has followed a similarly concerning trajectory: Climbing from a 7-day moving average of 3.9% on March 6 to an average of 4.9% as of yesterday.

Correspondingly, hospitalizations are increasing quickly as of late. Hospitalized patients testing positive for COVID-19 are up 26% for the first two weeks of April. Our hospitals reported a 17% increase in COVID-19 patients in March. That was after seeing declines in January and February.

OHA reported 47 COVID-19-related deaths for the week of April 5 through April 11, the highest toll in five weeks. To date, there have been 2,457 COVID-19 related deaths in Oregon. My thoughts go out to everyone who has experienced a loss to COVID-19 – over a year into this pandemic, every loss hurts.

Two weeks ago, I warned that with the rising spread of disease, counties might move into increased risk levels in the coming weeks.

Unfortunately, that caution has been realized.

As March ended there were 28 counties assessed as low to moderate risk. Today, there are 22. And several counties are facing possible risk level upgrades in the coming weeks.

We are all tired of fighting COVID – tired of wearing masks, missing our loved ones and keeping our distance -- but we must continue to fight. As more of us – and our family friends and neighbors – get vaccinated, we must continue to wear our masks, limit higher risk indoor gatherings and keep our distance. Variants are increasing at alarming rates – spreading COVID faster and sickening more of our neighbors.

Let me share some stories of ongoing spread. It's worth noting that several outbreaks involved large social gatherings where people were not socially distant or wearing masks.

- There was a multi-night karaoke event that led to 36 cases, 3 hospitalizations and 1 death.
- There was an indoor concert at a small music venue that produced 15 cases.
- There was a backyard gathering of 10 people that resulted in all attendees falling ill.

It's another reminder that even small lapses can be consequential.

Today, we find ourselves at another inflection point. Our actions over the next few weeks will determine when and whether we are able to escape the pandemic.

We have worked diligently since March to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our communities. We have stayed home – moved celebrations online, missed mourning with our families, some have lost jobs – and all have made tremendous sacrifices.

We have worked diligently since December to ensure that the people most at risk of exposure —health workers, first responders, residents and staff of long-term care and other congregate settings, people over 65, those with underlying medical conditions, frontline workers and members of multigenerational households—were vaccinated first.

Every day we are working with our local and health care partners on strategies to reach the most vulnerable Oregonians and those who have been most affected by the pandemic. Our data show we need to do more to get our hardest hit communities vaccinated, especially the Latino/Latina and Black communities.

Oregon vaccinators are administering, on average, more than 38,000 doses a day. Over 945,000 Oregonians have been fully vaccinated and about 1.5 million have received at least one dose.

Now, as Governor Brown said earlier, we are approaching the major milestone of opening vaccinations to anyone in Oregon 16 and older.

At the same time, we are confronting emerging and more contagious variants. According to the CDC, the B.1.1.7 variant -- which is rising rapidly in Oregon -- is now the dominant strain of the virus in the U.S. Many states which are ahead of Oregon in the spread of B.1.1.7 are seeing hospitals fill up.

But the good news is that we ALL have the tools to protect ourselves and our loved ones by wearing masks, keeping our distance, and limiting higher risk indoor gatherings.

And starting Monday, many more of us will have another one: Access to vaccine.

COVID-19 has been a formidable foe. The disease respects no age boundaries or demographic. The largest increase of illnesses in Oregon is in people in their twenties. The second biggest increase is in people in their thirties.

Hospitals around the U.S. are seeing more people in their 30s and 40s admitted with severe cases as the virus continues to mutate, according to the CDC.

We know what new mutations will bring – more rapid spread and more people in the hospital.

But we also know what Oregonians do when faced with this virus – they fight it – wearing masks, keeping their distance and limiting higher-risk indoor gatherings. And now by getting vaccinated.

The existing vaccines have proven to be highly effective at preventing severe infections resulting in hospitalizations and deaths.

Now let me address the situation with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. On Tuesday, OHA asked all the state's vaccine providers to immediately pause administering the vaccine, following an announcement from the CDC and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The recommendation was made pending reviews by both agencies into six cases of a rare and severe type of blood clot in women ages 18 to 48 after they began showing symptoms beginning six to 13 days after vaccination. This action shows that our safety monitoring works – picking up a potential issue early.

- None of the reported cases were in Oregon, where we've administered more than 85,000 doses.

- If you've received the vaccine and have gone at least three weeks without side effects, you won't develop this condition.

If it has been less than three weeks since you've gotten the vaccine and you develop new severe headache, severe abdominal pain, shortness of breath, or leg swelling – seek medical care.

I recognize that this is concerning for many of you who either received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine or were looking forward to getting it.

But let me repeat: The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective

We look forward to getting an update from the review of these cases in the next week.

Make a plan to get vaccinated. Do it to protect yourself -- your family and friends, your colleagues and neighbors and your communities -- and for all of us.

You can register through the **Get Vaccinated Oregon** web tool at getvaccinated.oregon.gov. The CDC also offers a vaccine finder tool at vaccinefinder.org, where you can just type in your Zip code to find vaccines near you.

And Oregonians can always get help by texting ORCOVID to 898211 or emailing ORCOVID@211info.org.

Getting enough people vaccinated to achieve community immunity may take many months. But it will happen more quickly – and we can keep the virus from overtaking us -- if we remain faithful to the public health interventions.

We in Oregon have made tremendous progress in turning the tide of COVID-19. Thank you for your diligence wearing masks, maintaining physical distancing, and – coming soon – for getting vaccinated.

As I've said before: This is not forever – just for now.