

Governor's news conference (August 19, 2021)

Director Patrick Allen:

Thank you, Governor Brown. I'm Patrick Allen, Director of the Oregon Health Authority. This morning, I want to give you an update on steps the Oregon Health Authority and other state and federal partners are taking to rescue our hospitals from being overwhelmed by nearly a thousand COVID-19 patients infected with the Delta variant, nearly all of whom are unvaccinated.

And I need to ask every Oregonian to help: we can blunt this surge and save our hospitals if unvaccinated adults get immunized and we all wear masks when we're in indoor public places. And if you remain unvaccinated, you need to take extreme precautions and avoid any non-essential activities where you're around others, so you don't catch and spread the Delta variant. It's that simple. It's that urgent.

The numbers grow every day. I want to be honest: the situation in Oregon hospitals is growing increasingly dire. Our health care system is on the verge of collapse in parts of the state. In coming weeks, every Oregon hospital could be over-topped.

Right now, ambulances are transporting more people in respiratory distress, but they have to wait longer to get patients into emergency departments, because those beds are full. Patients are spending days in emergency departments because critical care beds aren't available – right now, more than 200 patients are boarding in Oregon hospital EDs waiting for a bed. Hospitals are converting outpatient rooms to medical/surgical rooms or ICU beds. Patients are parked in hallways. Staffing is critically short.

I need to be direct about what's causing this crisis: a growing wave of unvaccinated patients who have become so seriously sick with the Delta variant they need to be hospitalized.

We've said it before. The COVID-19 pandemic is now a pandemic of the unvaccinated –more than a quarter of the adult population still remains unprotected from COVID-19. Overwhelmed hospitals are what happens when such a large reservoir of vulnerable people offers itself as targets for a virus that has killed more than 600,000 Americans and almost 3,000 Oregonians.

State health officials are working desperately alongside hospital administrators and staff to keep Oregon hospitals staffed and beds open.

But here's what we all need to face: Oregon hospitals are not far from reaching the point where health systems may not be able to provide the highest levels of care to everyone who needs it. Whether they have COVID-19. Or if they've been in an accident. Or if they've had a heart attack, or any of the other many medical crises any of us could suddenly and unexpectedly experience **today or any day** in our lives.

We're not at that grim point – **yet. But if we don't act**, the crushing influx of unvaccinated COVID-19 patients means that doctors and nurses in some hospitals may soon face the terrible prospect of having to make heart-wrenching triage decisions about whom they can save and whom they cannot.

I know many people have struggled to acknowledge the threat COVID-19 poses to Oregon. But whether you view COVID-19 with concern or contrarianism, here are the stark facts we're facing:

- **Today, we set another new record for ICU patients.** As of this morning, 845 Oregonians are hospitalized with COVID-19 and 226 are in intensive care, two more than yesterday.
- **We also had another record-setting week in hospitalizations.** Over the past reporting week (which ended Aug. 15), a total of 546 Oregonians with COVID-19 were hospitalized. That figure is up from 322 COVID-19 hospitalizations the prior week.
 - That's a 42% increase in one week.

- That total represents the fifth consecutive week of increases. It is the highest weekly figure of the pandemic.
- **The situation has changed dramatically in a month.** On July 19, there were 148 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 in Oregon and 39 in intensive care. In the past month, we've seen more than 500% increases in these numbers.
- **Hospitals are approaching their maximum limits in beds and staffing.**
 - 93% of hospital beds in Oregon are occupied.
 - 94% of adult ICU beds are full statewide.
 - Yesterday, Region 2 (which includes Salem) had no adult ICU beds available.

The Oregon Health Authority and our partners are working to shore-up the two most important parts of a functioning hospital system: patient beds and the people who staff them.

Let's start with the beds.

- **We're working with the Oregon Department of Human Services and long-term care facilities to create surge beds to ease overcrowding in hospitals.** Skilled nursing facilities and rehabilitation centers will stand up surge and decompression beds in high impact regions to help hospital patients who are waiting for discharge to other facilities where they can continue to safely recover. Speeding up these discharges frees more desperately needed hospital beds and staff to care for seriously ill patients with COVID-19 or other diseases, injuries or trauma.
 - State agencies also are working to cut red tape to remove prior authorization barriers and expedite appropriate patient discharges from hospitals to lower levels of care.
- **Oregon continues to pursue a fully staffed field hospital from the federal government.** On Aug. 10, OHA submitted a request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for a mobile hospital. We're keeping Oregon's congressional delegation informed while we continue discussions with our federal partners. We understand that many other

states are facing even worse challenges than Oregon, but we will continue to pursue federal help despite the competing demands for these limited resources.

- There is some late-breaking good news: Through Governor Brown's urgent advocacy and the responsiveness of our federal partners, Oregon will receive 24 EMT-Paramedics through the FEMA National Ambulance Contract to support 6 hospital emergency departments (ED) as emergency department extenders.
 - In 96 hours, we will have 24 EMT-Paramedics at these 6 hospitals:
 - ✓ Asante-Rogue Valley Medical (Jackson County): 5 Paramedics.
 - ✓ Asante Three Rivers (Josephine County): 5 Paramedics.
 - ✓ St. Charles, Bend (Deschutes County): 3 Paramedics.
 - ✓ St. Charles Redmond (Deschutes County): 3 Paramedics.
 - ✓ Providence Medford: 4 Paramedics.
 - ✓ Mercy Medical Center (Roseburg, Douglas Co): 4 Paramedics.

As in the case of the federal field hospital, we know more beds only help if we have enough health care workers to treat the patients in them.

From day one of this pandemic, I have remained profoundly grateful to Oregon's committed, caring and resilient health care workers. Here are the steps we're taking to support them:

- **Oregon National Guard deployment:** On Aug. 13, [Governor Brown announced](#) the deployment of 1,500 Oregon National Guard members to support frontline health care workers at more than 20 hospitals statewide.
 - Starting Aug. 20th, an initial 500 Guard members will be sent to hospitals around the state to provide logistical support, as well as assisting with COVID-19 testing and other services to support hospital operations.

- After consultation with hospitals, we expect to call-up 1,500 Guard members, the maximum service members available at this time.
 - The first wave will be deployed in hospitals serving Deschutes, Douglas, Jackson and Josephine counties.
 - Hospitals in Columbia, Curry, Marion and the Tri-county region will be prioritized for the second wave.
- Like health care workers, I'm grateful to our Guard members, who have answered the call throughout the pandemic.
- **We've asked for medical personnel from other states:** Through OEM, Oregon has requested 35 physicians, 35 advanced practice providers, 300 registered nurses, 10 paramedics, and 100 respiratory technicians from other states. These staff would serve temporary assignments in central and southern Oregon.
- **We're contracting for 8 nurse crisis teams to staff surge beds in long-term care facilities to free more hospital beds.**
 - Four of the teams will start in Sept. Four more will start in October.
 - The first team will start Sept. 6 in Roseburg.
 - The second team will start Sept. 9 in Medford.
- **And we're working with licensing boards to set emergency rules that allow more flexibility in health care staffing:** The medical and nursing boards have issued temporary rules making it easier for out-of-state providers to work in Oregon during the crisis.

Let me end with some encouraging news. Oregon's vaccination rate continues to rebound. More and more Oregonians are choosing to get vaccinated every day.

- The seven-day running average of vaccinations is now 6,037 shots administered per day.
- The seven-day running average of first doses is 4,126. That's a 24% increase from the end of July.

The measures Governor Brown announced will drive these numbers up and help bring us closer to herd immunity. And they're just in time. If you are unvaccinated, the Delta variant changes everything. You are more at risk – people

in their 20s, 30s and 40s have been hospitalized. Some have even died. Older adults and children around you are more at risk, if you get this highly contagious variant.

And if you're still not ready to get vaccinated, please take extreme precautions. Avoid all non-essential activities. Stay away from large groups of people. When you do go out, wear your mask in public, even in outdoor spaces where you may be among crowds. The Delta variant is relentless in its search for new people to infect. Don't let it find you. The consequences for you, your family and our health care system could be catastrophic.

**Dr. Dean Sidelinger,
Health Officer and State Epidemiologist, OHA Public Health Division:**

The grip of the Delta variant is tightening, and without a concerted effort by all Oregonians over the next several weeks to wear masks and get vaccinated, we risk being swamped by the rapidly rising tide of infections in our communities.

Over the past week, daily cases and COVID-19-related hospitalizations have continued an alarming ascent – regularly setting new pandemic highs – far beyond what we experienced in previous surges.

The statistics are grim: our most recent COVID-19 Weekly Report tallied 12,741 cases for the week of Monday, Aug. 9 through Sunday, Aug. 15, a 54% increase over the previous week and a test positivity rate of 11.8%. Last week, OHA reported 8,304 cases, which was 40% higher than the week before.

Today, we are reporting 2,971 daily COVID-19 cases, bringing the overall total to 250,835. Sadly, we are also reporting 19 new COVID-19-related deaths, raising the statewide total to 2,994. Our hearts go out to every person who has experienced a loss to COVID-19.

The 635 new hospitalizations reported Aug. 10 set what was then a pandemic record. We have exceeded that total every day since. Today, OHA is reporting 845 COVID-19-related hospitalizations. This is putting an unprecedented strain on the ability of our hospitals to provide care to patients arriving at their doors.

This avalanche of new cases and virus-related hospitalizations far outpaced our recent modeling projections.

But, in a glimmer of hope, the most recent modeling being prepared by OHA and OHSU this week show modest slowing in the pace of increase in the coming weeks. This does NOT mean we can let down our guard. For this to happen – we need all Oregonians to take steps to protect themselves and their loved ones RIGHT now – get vaccinated if you are not already, wear masks in indoor public settings, and consider changing plans that put you at higher risk from getting COVID-19.

Throughout this recent surge one pattern has starkly emerged: Oregonians sick with COVID – nearly all of them unvaccinated – are filling hospital beds in record numbers. This poses a critical threat to ALL Oregonians in need of hospital care.

If you are unvaccinated, you have never been more vulnerable to being sickened by the virus, passing the virus on to your loved ones, getting seriously ill or dying from COVID-19. If you are unvaccinated you are risking the health of your family, your loved ones and everyone you encounter while infected.

Those are facts - supported by our data and the science to date. I shudder to think about what the pandemic landscape might look like today without the availability of highly effective and safe vaccines.

All three of the available vaccines serve as reliable shields against severe COVID-19 infection leading to hospitalization.

The COVID-19 vaccine is SAVING LIVES every day in Oregon.

More than 2.5 million Oregonians have had at least a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. In early July, Oregon reached 70% of all adults vaccinated.

In the meantime, we all must do our part by following prevention measures, most notably the requirement to wear masks while in public indoor settings.

The use of face coverings provides significant protection of people who are unvaccinated as well as providing additional protection against the small risk of

infection that exists for vaccinated people. They protect the person wearing the mask – as well as those around them and the loved ones we return home to.

Let me address the scientific basis for requiring masks. The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly spread through respiratory droplets and aerosols that float in the air.

These droplets are expelled when someone with COVID-19 speaks, coughs, or sneezes. Face coverings provide a barrier to these droplets – that when coupled with other intervention steps – reduce transmission.

Data from numerous laboratory and community studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of masking to reduce risk. Masks are safe. Masks do not affect a person's ability to breathe.

This is the basis for requiring face coverings in K-12 schools across Oregon. The use of face coverings can keep students learning in-person by reducing infections and quarantines, especially when paired with other layered prevention efforts.

Slide 1

This slide shows the increase in pediatric cases since July.

Young people, 18 and under, are accounting for a larger share of COVID-19 cases. Our most recent pediatric data, posted today, shows that there have been 31,394 cases within the under 18 age group, representing 12.7% of all COVID-19 cases.

Pediatric case rates are highest among communities of color and specifically people who identify as Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black or Hispanic.

Slide 2

And here we see that the highest case counts are in the 12-17 age range.

The report also shows that, while cases have increased, severe outcomes continue to be rare, but are still nonetheless devastating for families.

- 0.9 % of pediatric patients have been hospitalized at some point during their COVID-19 illness.
- There have been 2 reported deaths in Oregon with COVID-19 among people under 18 years.

By wearing our masks, and having our children wear theirs, we can ensure that those severe cases remain extremely low.

We can bring this surge under control by getting vaccinated and by wearing a mask and by remaining faithful to the mitigation measures that have worked to reverse previous surges.

To everyone who has taken the time and effort to get the vaccine – now to wear masks. Thank you.

Once again Oregonians are rising to the challenge. To people who have not yet been vaccinated. Please make a plan and get vaccinated.

It's the surest path back to the normalcy we all crave.

And with that, I will turn things back to Governor Brown.

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