

Governor's news conference (December 17, 2021)

Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen

Thank you, Governor Brown. I'm Patrick Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. I want to talk about what OHA is doing to:

- Protect people against the Omicron variant.
- Expand booster vaccinations. And ...
- Reinforce our already exhausted and overwhelmed health care workers to face the next big surge of COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Today's news is deeply troubling and demoralizing. We're finally escaping Delta's grip. It's the holidays and many people have plans to see family and friends they've missed during the course of a two-year pandemic. We all want to put COVID-19 behind us, once and for all.

But today's forecast is a warning we can't ignore. Like a tsunami alert, the OHSU forecast is telling us that a big wave is coming. And it threatens to be bigger than any wave we've seen before. We're tired of being swamped and battered by each new surge of infections, hospitalizations and deaths. But this isn't the moment to give up. We have time to save each other.

I know there are many people who are skeptical about COVID-19 warnings and some who — even now — doubt whether the pandemic is a real threat.

- Here are some facts: Since the Delta surge began this summer, more than 2,457 Oregonians have lost their lives ***to a variant of the virus that's less contagious than Omicron***. Those deaths occurred in a span of less than six months. Approximately 9 in 10 of these lives could have been saved by vaccinations.

I know there are many people who may hear that Omicron is more resistant to vaccines and assume there's no point to getting vaccinated.

- But here's what the science tells us: Early indications do show that Omicron is more resistant to vaccines. But even if a vaccine doesn't prevent an Omicron infection, people who are vaccinated are less likely to become severely ill. And the preliminary research tells us that a booster dose further builds antibodies to fight against the virus.

I know there are many people who see another variant on the horizon and wonder: Do any of the preventive measures we put in place actually make a difference?

- Here's the evidence that proves that your actions matter: Every single previous wave we've seen in Oregon began to recede when Oregon took measures to stop transmission, from wearing masks to expanding vaccinations.

Today, I want every Oregonian to know: the weeks between today and early January are critical. We are not powerless — the actions we take in the next few weeks will determine how many Oregonians survive the Omicron tide.

State and local health officials moving quickly to blunt the coming surge before Omicron fully takes hold in Oregon and hospitalizations spike out of control. But we need your help.

There are five immediate priorities in Oregon's Omicron response. First ...

1. Oregon will urge 1 million Oregonians to get boosters by the end of January: We don't know if Omicron is as virulent as Delta, but we know it's more contagious. More infections will lead to more hospitalizations, unless enough people are protected by boosters.

- As of December 16, more than 3 million Oregonians have received at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine and more than 2.5 million (or 74 percent) have completed their initial two doses (ranking Oregon 12th in the nation).
- Approximately 28 percent (or 945,759) of all Oregonians have received a booster or third dose.
- In coming weeks, we believe our 1 million booster goal is in line with the number of Oregonians who will be eligible to receive one, due to the time that's passed since they completed their initial COVID-19 vaccine series.

To reach our 1 million booster goal, we will:

- Support our partners in the health care system and in local public health departments to at least ***double or triple their current weekly booster vaccinations*** for the next month.

- Add three new high-capacity vaccination sites (in addition to the six current ones operating around the state) and resume mobile vaccination clinics, with support from FEMA, our contract with Jogan Health, and local public health and community partners.
- Add and deploy contracted health care staff to vaccination clinics to expand appointments and clinic hours. The lack of staff to put shots in arms is our primary constraint that's led to scarce appointments in some Oregon communities.
- Expand our supply of mRNA vaccines — we've asked for and received a supplemental quantity of vaccine from the federal government, enough to administer 140,000 booster doses. They have also agreed to our request for increased doses on an ongoing basis because of high demand statewide. These additional doses will help Oregon meet current demand and keep up with the increase we need.

Our goal to boost 1 million Oregonians by the end of January, is urgent and attainable. We have enough doses. We will bolster staffing for our vaccinators. The only question is demand — we need every eligible Oregonian to come forward for a protective booster dose.

Next ...

2. Oregon will focus boosters on people who are most vulnerable to becoming hospitalized if they catch the Omicron variant:

Our most urgent priority is to protect older adults (especially people in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities) with booster shots, as well as people in communities of color that have experienced the greatest inequities in vaccination rates.

- As of December 16, 51 percent of people age 65 or older (403,856) have received a booster or a third dose.
- In the coming weeks we will urgently move to protect the most vulnerable older Oregonians by:
 - Deploying mobile vaccination teams to skilled nursing facilities and other long-term care facilities in the next two weeks.
 - Working with long-term care facilities to implement their vaccination plans and provide staffing solutions.

- Providing incentives to get more residents and staff vaccinated.

For under-vaccinated communities, we will:

- Augment staffing at Federally Qualified Health Centers and other clinics to help them vaccinate approximately 800-1,000 people per day.
- Work with community-based organizations and trusted community leaders to stand-up 35 vaccination events for communities of color around the state, with an additional 93 events scheduled in coming weeks.

We know too many people of color were left behind in the initial vaccine rollout. These efforts will also support our continuing urgent priority to protect unvaccinated people of color with their initial doses.

Our third priority is to ...

3. Rapidly deliver new COVID-19 treatments and expand needed testing. New and coming monoclonal antibody therapies and antiviral drugs offer the promise of protection against hospitalization. For some drugs, they are effective within a narrow window of time after infection. OHA is:

- Working to develop a high throughput site for monoclonal antibody therapy in the Portland Metro area. This site will be open seven days a week, 11 hours a day and have the capacity to treat 350 people per week.
- Registering Oregon health care providers with federal agencies so they will be able to quickly receive newly approved antiviral drugs to treat COVID-19.
- Connect patients to treatment and testing to maximize the effectiveness of these new drugs.

These steps aren't enough. Our fourth priority is to ...

4. Support health care workers and hospitals in the face of the coming Omicron surge.

- We are extending our staffing contract to bring more nurses and other health care staff from out of state into Oregon's already hard-pressed hospitals and vaccination clinics.

- We'll use every lever at our disposal, including the Regional Hospital Collaborative and an emergency management command center, to coordinate the use of available beds, ventilators and other needed resources.
- We'll continue to work with long-term care facilities to provide alternative step-down beds to move patients who can be safely discharged out of hospitals and free desperately needed beds.
- And, before mid-January, we'll provide hospitals an interim crisis care tool they can use to equitably prioritize care if doctors and nurses are forced to make heart-breaking decisions in the face of limited intensive care beds, ventilators and other life-saving resources.

Finally, we will ...

5. Connect more people to boosters, treatments and testing. I know there are many people today who want a booster and are frustrated that they have to wait a week or more for a nearby appointment. As I said earlier, these local shortages are not due to a lack of vaccines — they're due to a lack of staffing in a health care system still reeling from Delta's punch.

As we expand high-capacity vaccination sites, deploy more mobile clinics and reinforce FQHCs with more vaccinators, we want Oregonians who are eligible for a booster to know where they can find one.

In coming days and weeks, we're shifting our outreach focus to connecting people to boosters. You'll see more outreach messages focused on boosters, from billboards to spots on social media. For example, next week we'll begin running ads on social media aimed at informing Spanish-speaking older adults that they're eligible for boosters and letting them know where they can get a shot.

But the steps health officials take won't stop Omicron alone. Ultimately, the number of lives we save comes down to choices each one of us make.

As Dr. Graven's model shows, our own actions can blunt Omicron's surge and keep thousands of Oregonians from going into the hospital over the coming months.

The overwhelming majority of Oregonians have exercised their personal responsibility and demonstrated their concern for their family and neighbors throughout the pandemic — more than 8 in 10 Oregon adults are vaccinated. Research shows that Oregonians wear masks in public more than Americans do in most other states.

Taking care of each other has been what Oregon has always been about. It's those values we need to call on again.

We can reach our goal to protect 1 million Oregonians by the end of January.

Get your booster as soon as you're eligible, no matter your age. Wear a mask when you're indoors in public. And keep your indoor gatherings small.

To find out where you can get a booster, go to: getvaccinated.oregon.gov. Now I'll turn it back to you, Governor Brown.