

Media Availability Talking Points 09-16-21

I'm happy to deliver some promising news about the current landscape in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Daily cases and hospitalizations are slowly coming down from the record-highs we have experienced over the past several weeks, an indication that Oregonians are once again stepping up to fend off the virus.

But our ability to sustain this hopeful progress and ultimately regain the upper hand in over the coming weeks, is dependent upon getting more adult Oregonians vaccinated, and on all of us continuing to wear masks when in indoor public spaces, when we're outdoors among crowds, and reconsidering plans that put us or others at higher risk of getting COVID-19.

That said, I want to emphasize that this latest surge is far from finished. **The Delta variant remains a formidable threat in our communities.**

We are still totaling more than 1,000 COVID-19 related hospitalizations a day. These capacity levels are not sustainable. Our health system remains under significant stress.

The newest data aligns with the latest modeling showing that daily cases and hospitalizations appear to have stabilized after peaking around the beginning of the month and projecting a gradual decline over the next several weeks.

Here's a sampling of that data:

- As of yesterday, our 7-day average of daily cases was 1,949. The same average on Sept. 1 was 2,200. We are seeing a corresponding drop in the percentage of positive tests, from 11.9% to 11.5% over the same period.
- Our most recent COVID-19 Weekly Report for the week ending Sept. 12, tallied 12,997 new daily cases, an 11% decline. That followed a 10% drop in cases the previous week, which reversed 8 previous weekly increases.
- COVID-19 related hospitalizations fell by 42%, following 6 consecutive weeks of increases.
- COVID-19 associated deaths declined by 30% from the previous week.

These are positive trends. But we need to keep up the pressure against the virus. We know from our experience in this pandemic that a slippage in our resolve can quickly erase these hard-won gains.

Only by getting vaccinated and by staying faithful to the public health interventions can we ensure that there will be enough available beds for everyone who experiences a medical emergency.

We are seeing another consistent trend in the data.

Unvaccinated people continue to account for an overwhelming majority of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Oregon and across the country.

The data shows, and the supporting science finds, that the available vaccines are effective shields against serious illness and death from all the COVID-19 variants.

If you think you're protected by COVID-19 because you've already had the virus, know this. The data show that people get better protection by being vaccinated – even if they've recovered from COVID-19.

I urge everyone who is eligible for vaccination to take advantage of this life-saving opportunity for yourself, for your families and for your communities.

Let me briefly address our approach to ensuring that our schools remain well protected against COVID-19.

Last week I promoted the testing programs that are available. Testing is important but as we've said before we cannot expect to test our way out the pandemic.

OHA has worked closely with the Oregon Department of Education in adopting a multi-layered approach to ensure that our schools remain well protected against COVID-19.

Every layer matters. Every layer helps keep students in class. That means vaccinations for those who are eligible, physical distancing, hand and cough hygiene, face coverings, smaller cohorts, ventilation, air filtration, staying home when sick and all the other measures our students and staff have learned and practiced over the last 19 months.

With COVID-19 cases high in our communities, we are seeing more students and staff needing to stay home while they recover or after exposure so that spread in schools can be minimized. With these measures in place, what we are NOT seeing is much spread of COVID-19 in schools.

We are confident that if our schools implement the new Ready Schools, Safe Learners protocols as designed, we can achieve the delicate balance of promoting the safety of students and staff while minimizing their risk of catching the virus in school and bringing it home.

Adherence to these protocols is critical to accomplishing our shared objective of ensuring that schools can reliably hold school in-person every day and all school year.

And when, as we hope happens sometime this fall, the federal government approves vaccinations for children under 12, we plan on making these vaccines widely available in clinics, community health centers, pharmacies and locations throughout communities.

We recognize that vaccinations for this age group could significantly increase vaccination rates, providing us with the momentum needed to decisively contain the virus, so we can all get back to doing the things we love and miss.

To everyone who has taken the time and effort to get the vaccine – and now to wear masks – thank you. Your shared commitment is working to blunt this latest surge and is saving our hospitals.

Let me conclude today by sharing a personal observation.

Earlier, I recited the numbers and trends for recent cases, hospitalizations and deaths. I want everyone to think about what these numbers represent.

Each number – or point on a graph – represents a fellow Oregonian. They may be sick at home, with family members caring for them. They may be receiving life-saving treatment in a hospital – from skilled, but exhausted, health care providers. Their loved ones anxiously awaiting updates – and hoping for good news.

They may have died – with loved ones gathering to share their favorite stories – and coming to the realization that they may never see their mother, brother, grandparent, niece, uncle or best friend again.

This grief has become far too common – but it has not gotten any easier.

Every morning, I sit with the new data from the day before.

Sometimes I cry. Sometimes I get angry – because much of the disease we are seeing now is preventable – and I wonder, what could I have done to reach even one more person to get vaccinated and take steps to protect themselves.

Some mornings I am numb to the pain of the suffering and death that the numbers represent.

- A mother or father
- A son or daughter, brother or sister
- A grandmother or grandfather
- A best friend, a neighbor, or a beloved co-worker

Every one of the them was loved – and every one of them leaves behind grieving loved ones.

Every morning I wonder: What we could have done to get them vaccinated?

What questions could we have answered?

Was there a place in their community they trusted that we could have directed them to?

Were they basing their decision on misinformation that we could have combated?

If they were still adamant about not getting vaccinated, what information could have convinced them to take other steps to protect themselves?

I sit silently with these thoughts every morning.

Going through this experience day after day drives me to work even harder to defeat this terrible enemy that has taken so much from all of us. I know the same is true for my public health colleagues across Oregon who are facing the tragic outcomes of COVID-19 that continue to plague us all.

I long for the day when we can put this terrible pandemic behind us, and I hope that we never forget the personal tragedy and pain it has extracted from all of us.

And now, I am happy to take your questions.

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