

Director Allen talking points (March 10, 2022)

Good afternoon. I'm Patrick Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. Thank you for joining us today as we mark the lifting of mask requirements in schools and in most indoor public settings.

Today we also are releasing Oregon's immediate priorities for the next phase of the pandemic. We call this framework the "RISE" plan: Resilience in Support of Equity. This plan outlines the steps Oregon will pursue to monitor COVID-19, shield people at highest risk, reinvigorate our communities and advance our work to eliminate health inequity.

It's a plan we'll continue to develop as we listen to and work with people in local communities.

Today, we're joined by Dr. Dean Sidelinger, our state epidemiologist and state health officer. He'll provide an update on the current COVID-19 situation, as hospitalizations and new cases continue to drop.

Also on today's call is Director Colt Gill, from the Oregon Department of Education. He'll answer your questions about schools.

Before we begin, I just want to note that this is my first news conference in several weeks. As many of you know, I have been out following a fall at my home. I returned to work full time at OHA on Monday after a planned vacation and after getting the green light from my doctor.

I'm feeling much better and I'm returning to a full schedule. I want to thank the emergency response and the medical staff who came to my aid and treated me.

In addition, I want to thank those of you who reached out to me and sent me your best wishes. I appreciate it.

I especially want to thank all the OHA staff who kept our agency running while I was out.

Let's talk about what today means and how we move forward.

Tonight at 11:59 p.m., masks will no longer be required indoors in most public places and in schools.

That's a watershed moment in this pandemic. It's a direct result of the actions Oregonians have taken over the past 2 years: getting vaccinated, wearing masks and limiting social gatherings during COVID-19 surges. The rate at which Oregonians have taken these steps far exceeds national averages.

As a result, we estimate Oregonians have saved approximately 5,700 lives. That's based on a projection of the additional deaths we could have recorded in our state if our death rate was the same as the national average.

That's an extraordinary testament to the impact so many of you have had in looking out for each other and reducing the spread of COVID-19.

Today is also a turning point. At this time, with Omicron waning and so few Oregonians susceptible to new infections, we can close the emergency phase of Oregon's COVID-19 response and open a new one.

In this next phase, our goal is to strengthen health resilience in our communities – not just to tackle COVID-19, but also to address long-standing health inequities and other challenges.

Oregon's top priority will be to support the capacity of the communities that have been hardest hit by COVID-19: communities of color and tribal communities. Before the pandemic, systemic racism and oppression fueled unfair health inequities that have shortened lives for many people and burdened communities of color and tribal communities with trauma, higher rates of chronic disease and other conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic only intensified and worsened these unfair and systemic health inequities.

But this new phase means OHA and other state agencies need to play a different role than the one we have played through the first two years of the pandemic.

It means we can scale back the broad policy interventions and supply efforts COVID-19 initially demanded and focus on people and communities most harmed during the pandemic, as well as people who continue to be most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Our job will be to listen to local priorities. Our role will be to support local efforts to build resilience and improve health equity. Our goal will be to help local health

care providers, public health officials and non-profits work together to address all the barriers to good health their communities face.

The RISE plan describes five immediate priorities to strengthen local resilience and speed our statewide recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Those priorities are:

- **Protect communities that have been hardest hit by COVID-19.**
- **Protect people who are most vulnerable to COVID-19.**
- **Expand access to vital health care and support a thriving workforce.**
- **Keep schools safe for students, staff and families and help students recover instructional time.**
- **Restore social cohesion by listening to and support the priorities of local communities and the steps people take to protect themselves and others.**

Here are some of the highlights of our new or ongoing efforts to strengthen community resilience. Oregon will:

- Continue to test wastewater samples from more than 40 communities to track disease spread and the presence of variants.
- Maintain capacity to administer more than 25,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses per day.
- Supply providers enough courses of COVID-19 therapeutics to treat more than 1,400 people at risk of severe illness per week.
- Maintain testing supplies and laboratory capacity to perform a baseline of 130,000 COVID-19 tests per week, in the event we face a resurgence in demand.
- Maintain or expand health coverage to as many as 350,000 people.
- Begin distributing \$200 million in workforce development grants to benefit students, apprentices and adults seeking more competitive skills.
- Continue to hold listening sessions to hear from communities of color and tribal communities, local public health officials and people in rural communities to hear how we can support local priorities more effectively.

COVID-19 changed our world, our nation, our state and each one of us personally. For Oregon, the pandemic brought to light the strength of our character and our willingness to sacrifice and care for each other. We saved lives.

But the pandemic also displayed the shortcomings of government agencies and our health care system to care for everyone equitably. And it revealed the fault lines of distrust within our communities.

Moving forward we can enhance our resilience against COVID-19 with our shared commitment to make Oregon a better place for our families and each other.

We don't know what the end of the COVID-19 pandemic will bring. But we do know that, together, Oregon will RISE.

And with that, let me turn it over to Dr. Sidelinger.