

Dean Sidelinger talking points 03-11-22

Thank you, Director Allen.

I'd like to begin today by offering my profound thanks for the shared sacrifice and diligence Oregonians have shown throughout the course of the pandemic.

Three months ago, we came before you with a dire warning about the coming Omicron threat, with projected COVID-19-related hospitalizations beyond anything we had previously experienced. Initial projections called for more than 2,000 hospitalizations if Omicron was left unchecked.

Oregonians heeded that warning. You stepped up and, as so often has happened throughout the pandemic, you got vaccinated, and boosted, wore masks and changed your gatherings.

Omicron proved to be no match for your resilience and resolve. Our hospitals are no longer imperiled. The data indicates that the spread of COVID-19 in Oregon has tapered dramatically.

And conditions now support formally lifting the general mask requirements for indoor settings and in schools starting tomorrow.

COVID-19-related hospitalizations have declined at a dizzying rate in recent weeks – far outpacing our projections – and have returned to levels we experienced in late summer, before the Delta and Omicron surges.

At the Omicron peak, there were 1,130 COVID-19 patients in Oregon's hospitals. Since then, daily hospitalizations have fallen by 77%.

Since March 1, we have shed 199 daily hospitalizations. The most recent model from our partners at OHSU predicted that hospitalizations would fall below 200 around the end of March.

Today, OHA is reporting 261 COVID-19- related hospitalizations.

Daily reported infections also have fallen dramatically in recent weeks.

The current 7-day average of 520 daily cases is 94% lower than the peak of 8,209 cases on Jan. 20. This is the lowest 7-day average since July.

While the recent data is incredibly encouraging, it's important to understand that the pandemic is not yet over.

We will continue to see new cases of disease, and we fully expect new variants to emerge. But we believe the firewall of immunity we currently have, will help keep the virus at bay.

More than 80% of Oregonians now have protection against severe illness, whether by vaccination, or following recovery from a recent infection.

For those reasons, it is now safe to lift the restrictions we've lived under for most of the past two years. For OHA and the state, this means transitioning into a supporting role for personal and local decision-making. This is consistent with the way Oregon's public health system is designed to function.

Lifting the mask requirements will no doubt come as welcome news for many. For others it means more anxiety – for their own health or the health of those around them.

But there will still be requirements in certain settings.

- Masks will still be required in health care settings. This is necessary to protect our providers and the vulnerable patients they serve.
- Federal mask requirements are still in place for public transportation and other specialized settings.

OHA continues recommending mask wearing for some people - including people who are unvaccinated. Those who are immunocompromised. Those at higher risk for complications. Those who are 65 and older. Those who live with someone in one of these categories. This is especially important in communities with higher levels of disease.

Universal masking as a primary protective measure is effective in schools, and we recommend this as part of layered protective measures, in communities with high levels of spread.

For some people wearing a mask may provide an added sense of security, and that is totally fine. We should respect everyone's decision.

Mask wearing in many countries was common before the start of the pandemic. My hope is that it becomes as unremarkable an occurrence, as someone who chooses to carry an umbrella on a rainy day.

We have finally gained an upper hand against COVID-19. But there are steps we can take to keep the virus at bay.

Get vaccinated, or get a booster shot as soon as you're eligible. Vaccination continues to provide the best protection against severe illness from COVID-19 and its variants.

Wear a mask when appropriate. The CDC has issued new guidance for mask wearing for indoor settings that is reflective of level of transmission in our communities.

Stay home if you are sick with COVID-19. Isolate for five days, then wear a mask around others for five days afterward. If you are at higher risk for severe disease, get tested if you have symptoms.

Through the course of the pandemic, we acted swiftly to implement measures intended to choke off the virus. We made changes to respond to the situation in front of us with the tools available.

Oregonians were overwhelmingly supportive and as a result, our state avoided some of the most serious impacts experienced in other parts of the United States.

Here's where Oregon ranks in some of the key pandemic measures against other states and the District of Columbia.

- 3rd lowest per capita case rate and 7th lowest death rate.
- 12th in the percentage of the population that is fully vaccinated and 9th in the percentage of population that has received booster shots.
- 10th in the percentage of eligible residents who have received a booster shot.
- 18th in the percentage of residents who are fully vaccinated.

Oregon has consistently ranked near the top in mask wearing according to surveys, even as participation dwindled in other states.

Again, thank you.

Last summer we found ourselves in a similar position – to radically change of our approach to fighting COVID in the face of lower disease rates.

Then we had to confront new variants.

This time feels different – because it is different. We have higher levels of immunity. We have additional treatments. We continue to monitor changes in the virus – and do not see any emerging variants on the horizon.

I want to acknowledge everyone who lost a loved one to the virus and to those who were ill, or cared for someone who was ill. I grieve with you.

Many of us are anxious about these changes. Let's continue to support each other as we move forward.

I want to conclude by saying a heartfelt thank you to my public health colleagues, our health professionals and community partners who fought off fatigue, emotional exhaustion and attrition, to keep Oregonians healthy.

Now we can take your questions.

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