

Media briefing (January 13, 2022)

Director Patrick Allen, Oregon Health Authority

Good afternoon, I'm Patrick Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. We're here today to update you on steps our state is taking to help Oregonians protect themselves during the Omicron surge, prevent our health care system from being overwhelmed and help schools navigate this difficult time. I'm joined by:

- Fairborz Pakseresht, Director of the Oregon Department of Human Services,
- Kathleen George, Council Member for the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and a Spirit Mountain Casino Board member. She'll be speaking about a new vaccination and testing clinic opening at Spirit Mountain this weekend.
- Colt Gill, Director of the Oregon Department of Education, and
- Dr. Dean Sidelinger, our state health officer, who will answer questions.

The Omicron variant continues to tighten its grip on Oregon. Today we're reporting 9,797 new cases.

- As of yesterday, our 7-day moving average of new cases was 7,618, a 128 percent increase over the previous week.
- For the week ending Jan 9, Oregon recorded an astounding 47,272 cases, which was 3 times higher than the previous pandemic record and 6 times higher than was reported only two weeks ago.

Every day brings more hospitalizations. Today there are 777 people hospitalized with COVID-19, 21 more than yesterday. Our statewide ICU capacity is now at 5 percent. Hospitalizations are more than 45 percent above the past week. Hospitalizations have increased more than 70 percent since the start of the new year.

In light of those numbers, I'd like to take some time to talk about COVID-19 testing. Since the first days of the pandemic, we've known that testing is essential to slow the spread of COVID-19. But the United States has struggled to deliver adequate testing.

For most of the pandemic, testing has been in short supply.

Today, a COVID-19 test remains a scarce commodity, across the United States. It's no different in Oregon. I know many people are worried and frustrated because timely tests are hard to come by unless you have the flexibility and patience to wait your turn in line at a testing site.

I hear it from friends, family and even co-workers. Many people in Oregon are having to wait several days for a testing appointment at a health clinic or a pharmacy. You may have to wait a couple of weeks for the test you ordered online to arrive. Those delays don't help if you're feeling sick and you want to know if you could be a risk to your family or if you can safely go to work.

These frustrations are real, and they may be with us for weeks. But while it may seem like a COVID-19 test is impossible to find, Oregon's testing volume has never been higher than it is today.

- During the first week of January, testing volume nearly doubled over the previous week.
- Over the past 7 days, Oregon has recorded more than 300,000 COVID-19 tests.
- According to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), Oregon ranks 16th in the nation in daily testing volume, with 4,620 tests per million people (as of January 10th).

I want to make that point again: Oregon's testing volume has never been higher. And our testing volume will only increase as the millions of at-home, rapid antigen tests we purchased continue to arrive in our state.

We've been asked the question: if Oregon ordered 12 million tests, where are they? How can I get one?

- Last week, Oregon received 589,680 test kits (over a million tests), which we prioritized for critical state infrastructure: hospitals and schools.
- We've sent 567,810 to 37 hospitals across the state – sending out over 96% of the tests we received.
- We've continued to receive more test kits since then:
 - Over the past weekend, 5 more shipments that contained nearly 1 million more test kits headed toward Oregon.

- Yesterday, two of these shipments arrived, containing 393,120 test kits.
- In total, we have received 982,800 test kits to date.
- The manufacturer tells us another 982,800 test kits will arrive in Oregon within the next 7 days.
- We expect to have all 6 million test kits in state by the end of January.

We're currently supporting 10 high-volume vaccine sites in Clackamas, Coos, Deschutes, Douglas, Lane, Jackson, Marion, Multnomah, Polk and Yamhill counties. Six of those sites have testing available and we are working to add testing to the remaining sites by next week through partnerships with Curative and the federal government.

Some of these sites are indoor, walk-up vaccine clinics. Others are outdoor, drive-thru clinics. Most of these vaccine clinics don't require an appointment but check to see if you need an appointment to get tested.

On Saturday, our partners at the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde will open a high-volume vaccine site at Spirit Mountain Casino and testing will be added next week. We've also requested 3 additional federal testing sites in the Willamette valley. Throughout January, we're offering testing and vaccination clinics at markets and other locations serving people in the Latino/Latina/Latinx community, so we can reach this hard-hit population.

I want to be very clear about the decisions we've made in allocating our 6 million at-home, rapid antigen tests. We are distributing these tests to:

- Hospitals and schools.
- Local public health authorities and tribal governments.
- Community-based organizations that serve communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.
- Head Start programs.
- Organizations who serve agricultural workers and
- Organizations that serve the homeless.

Our test distribution strategy is grounded in fairness and equity. We are prioritizing the 6 million test kits we've purchased for organizations serving

people who are most exposed or most vulnerable to COVID-19, or people who have less access to a test.

We are not offering the limited, online, direct-to-consumer opportunities some other states have provided. Instead, we want to make sure tests are available to people like:

- A nurse in a hospital.
- A grocery store clerk who has limited sick leave, if any.
- A Head Start teacher, whom a dozen families entrust their children to each day.
- A worker in a seafood processing plant, who's working alongside others on the line, all of whom have families that depend on their hourly wages.

Again, Oregon is testing more people than we ever have before. Oregon is outpacing most other states in our current testing volume. But as Omicron rips through our communities, testing demand is also running rampant. If we are going to keep Omicron from disrupting our economy and our health care system, we need to target our testing resources in ways that are smart and fair.

Sky-high cases mean that demand for tests will remain sky-high for several more weeks. If you are someone who's not feeling well, but you are at low-risk – you're not a senior, you don't have underlying conditions or you're not immune-compromised – here's what you should do if a timely test isn't at your fingertips:

- Assume your symptoms are COVID-19.
- Isolate yourself from others for 5 days.
- Wear a mask.
- If after 5 days, you don't have a fever and your symptoms are better, you can return to your normal activities while being careful to wear a well-fitting mask.

What should Oregonians do if you get a positive test result?

Yesterday, the Oregon Health Authority announced a new website and hotline as a way for people who test positive for the virus to report results from an at-home test kit or testing provider.

People using the new [Positive COVID Test](#) website and *COVID-19 Case Support Hotline*, 866-917-8881, can complete an online survey linked from the web portal to report their positive case, or get help completing the survey through the hotline. They can also get information on isolation and other ways to keep themselves and those around them safe while they recover.

The launch of the services follows an OHA decision to revise our COVID-19 case investigation guidelines and shift to an opt-in model of case reporting. In the face of rapidly rising Omicron cases, public health authorities will focus less on interviewing individual cases and conducting contact tracing, and more on outbreaks in high-risk settings, such as those in congregate care, health care, K-12 education and food processing industries.

- Self-reported results that come into the hot line will be included in our daily case counts.
- Self-reported results from the website will be reviewed by epidemiologists to determine if they meet the presumptive case definition.

Two years into the pandemic, this reporting change is part of a broader shift away from case counts as the primary yardstick of the pandemic.

We'll still report daily case counts. We'll still gauge the overall trend in newly diagnosed cases. But we know our daily case counts are missing many at-home test results. And in the face of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, case data is also missing many undiagnosed cases as well.

And to be completely transparent, we are likely approaching the maximum capacity our testing system has to identify cases.

Instead, hospitalizations and deaths will continue to represent our most reliable and significant metrics. And, as it has been since day one of the pandemic, protecting Oregonians from these events will remain our primary focus and our over-riding imperative.

Here are some of the latest steps OHA is taking to support hospitals amid the Omicron surge.

- We are working with the Oregon National Guard to dispatch approximately 1,200 National Guard members to hospitals to provide non-clinical support services, freeing up resources for other points of care.
 - On behalf of all Oregonians, I want to express my deepest gratitude to all the Guard members who have stepped forward to support Oregon in countless ways, at the cost of untold personal sacrifice in their own personal lives, throughout this pandemic.
- OHA has placed 619 clinicians on-site at hospitals, long term care, vaccination sites and other health care settings through our existing contracts.
 - By late next week, one of our contractors, Jogan Health, is expected to have formed a rapid relief pool of 200 health care professionals who will stand ready to be deployed to facilities that are on the brink of being overwhelmed.
 - Public health officials are working with Jogan to add an additional 300 medical personnel in the following weeks.
- State health officials have executed a new contract with Maxim Health, who is working to staff about 700 clinical positions in health systems and long-term care facilities.
- We are also in the process of finalizing contracts to bring in another 600 LPN's and RN's, which will be deployed to long-term care health facilities throughout the state.

But we all have a responsibility to protect ourselves, the people we care about and the health care system we all depend on. The best ways to do that are: get vaccinated, get boosted and wear a mask.

On December 17th, Governor Brown called on all eligible Oregonians to get a COVID-19 booster shot and called on 1 million Oregonians to get boosted by the end of January.

State officials got ready to boost them: together with our partners, we launched 10 new mid-capacity vaccination clinics, deployed FEMA mobile vaccination teams and coordinated vaccinations with nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

- As of January 12th, 323,130 Oregonians have received a booster. That means Oregon needs 676,870 people to get a booster to reach the goal and make our state safer from the Omicron variant.
- Oregon currently ranks 13th in the nation in our rate of booster doses. As of yesterday, 42.5 percent of the eligible population has received a booster.
- Oregon has been successful in boosting seniors – our most vulnerable population.
 - As of yesterday, 450,624 seniors (or 71 percent) had received the protection of a booster dose.
 - To date, nearly 9 in 10 long-term care facilities have had a booster clinic. We're continuing to push facilities that have yet to schedule a booster clinic to get vaccinators in their doors.

It's no secret we're behind the pace we need to reach our additional 1 million booster goal. Right now we're likely to add about 650,000 new boosters by the end of the month. That's a big total, but we are still aiming higher.

At a time when so many people are desperately seeking a COVID-19 test to find out whether they're infected with Omicron, Oregon vaccinators stand ready to help you take the most important step you can, to protect yourselves and the people around you: Get a booster dose.

Director Colt Gill, Oregon Department of Education

Good afternoon everyone. Last week I reiterated our North Star for this school year: To safely hold school in-person, all-day, every school day, for every student, all year long.

Another week into Oregon's Omicron driven COVID-19 surge, and we have seen a few dozen public and private schools cancel a day or two of instruction or move, temporarily, to short-term distance learning.

These moves have happened due to staff shortages that were exacerbated by Omicron-related staff illnesses, isolations, and quarantines. These challenges have impacted schools in urban, suburban, and rural parts of Oregon.

Omicron is a statewide challenge for us as it continues to surge across Oregon. This surge is predicted to continue to increase for the next two weeks before peaking.

Oregon is home to more than 1,300 schools. Only a few dozen schools have had to make a temporary move away from in-person learning. Holding school in-person remains the highest priority for our state and for every one of our schools.

We believe most children learn better when taught in-person. We know children and families rely on schools to provide a caring and safe environment. And, many students need access to a solid breakfast and a warm lunch that is provided at school. For parents and families, consistency matters, and for many, school is a way to ensure parents can go to work and support their families.

I have checked-in with many teachers, superintendents and others working in our schools during this last week. Our educators are giving their all in very trying times. We have asked a lot of our educators, our students, and our families these past two years and the current surge is pushing a stressed system to its limits.

But, the potential for better days is in sight. In Oregon, we are at our strongest when we pull together and unify to tackle our challenges. We can and will get through this current surge. But I believe we can do better than just "get through".

We can do better if we can surface the deepest community values of Oregonians, then we can muster the extra effort in this time to give one another a hand, to offer a smile, to share a kind word, to work in unison – if we can do this, we will

keep more of our schools operating in-person, helping more of our children thrive, and ensuring our families have what they need to succeed.

Together we must set our COVID fatigue aside and reteach, reestablish, and reemphasize all the layered mitigation protocols, including:

- Getting vaccinated and boosted to avoid quarantines;
- Wearing properly fitting masks and maintaining physical distancing to limit spread; and
- Implementing testing, quarantine, and isolation protocols to keep others in the community safe.

Even with high community spread, consistently implementing these practices keeps COVID-19 from spreading in structured school environments, but we must fully commit to it to ensure this works with the incredibly contagious Omicron variant.

Finally – please also know this, in my many discussions with school superintendents this week, it is clear that the safety of our students, families, and staff during these difficult times are at the forefront of their decision-making.

They are considering the physical and mental well-being of all in their care. Having to transition, temporarily, to short-term distance learning is last on their list of options. It is only considered when they do not have enough staff to operate safely or if community spread requires it. If they transition to in-person learning, it will be disruptive for everyone and it will also be temporary – much like this current Omicron surge is for Oregon.

Thank you for doing what you can to help us reach our North Star for kids this year. Let's keep our school doors open.

Director Fairborz Pakseresht, Oregon Department of Human Services

The Oregon Department of Human Services and Oregon Health Authority have worked closely together throughout the pandemic to prevent COVID-19 infections and ensure not only hospitals, but *all* levels of care and support, are safe and readily available to Oregonians we serve.

We also respond together when outbreaks occur, not only to protect Oregonians but to help alleviate workforce shortages.

Our response has evolved over time. We've adapted to meet the demands of each new surge and the unique strain that each wave has put on all types of care providers. We've also built multi-agency teams throughout the pandemic that now have depth of experience.

During the current Omicron surge, these teams are expanding our resources to help care providers: including those facilities and homes licensed by ODHS as well as in-home care providers who serve Oregonians who receive ODHS services.

For example, during the Delta variant surge, ODHS teams focused on assisting hospitals with finding care options for patients ready for discharge whether or not they were receiving services from us; to prepare for Omicron, ODHS focused on establishing a network of Short-term Care Discharge Units statewide that are under contract in a licensed long-term care facility to care for individuals requiring nursing-home level of care after leaving the hospital. Referrals to these facilities are managed by ODHS, which also continues to provide hospitals with discharge assistance for individuals.

One thing the pandemic has reinforced for us is how interconnected our systems are. A shortage of hospital beds, for example, is exacerbated when other care options, including in-home care and long-term care, are also under severe strain. So, focusing staff support on hospitals doesn't fully address the problem. Oregonians can't leave the hospital if they have no options for the care they require following discharge.

In turn, a long-term care facility may have available beds, but if they are experiencing a staff shortage, they can't fill them because there's no one to

provide care.

Our response to the Omicron surge is based on what we know about the supports and resources that have the highest impact in helping meet the staffing and capacity needs of all care provider types.

To that end, together we've made a significant investment in resources and rolled out multiple initiatives that aim to prevent a regional care crisis and to respond more effectively in the event one occurs.

These initiatives, and I'll list them for you, include:

- **Temporary staffing support.** OHA and ODHS are in process of securing 500 contracted clinicians from out of state to strategically deploy to support long-term care facilities during this surge.

We are deploying these supports in two primary ways:

- 1) To ensure available staffed beds in long-term care so that hospitals are able to discharge individuals, who are ready, for short-term recovery; and
- 2) To support long-term care facilities during COVID outbreaks and workforce shortages to ensure residents receive the care they require.

Currently 20 long-term care facilities, 37 group homes and Oregon's Stabilization and Crisis Unit, which serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, have active staffing support.

- **Monitoring bed capacity.** We are actively surveying long-term care facilities about their bed and staffing capacity to monitor for potential workforce and bed shortages by region so that we can get out in front of an emerging crisis.
- **Providing dedicated care units for the surge.** We have set up dedicated care units to serve Oregonians who may otherwise linger at a hospital because they have no other option. We have:

- **6 Short-term Care Discharge Units with 150 beds** to serve Oregonians who are ready to be discharged from the hospital but have not been able to secure the care they need while they fully recover.
- And we have under contract **7 COVID-19 Recovery Units with a total of 188 beds** to care for Oregonians who are recovering from COVID-19. These units also assist with the workforce shortage in long-term care because, without them, a long-term care facility would have to maintain a separate set of staff to care for COVID-19 positive residents.
- **Ensuring access to boosters.** We know vaccines and boosters are our best opportunity to prevent infections, serious illness and hospitalizations. To that end we are:
- **Assisting facilities with COVID-19 vaccine and booster-shot clinic opportunities:**
 - As of Tuesday, each of the state's licensed long-term care congregate facilities have connected with OHA about their ability to provide vaccines and booster shots or have already received help through a mobile vaccine clinic.
 - Outreach is also underway to reach smaller homes and congregate settings that provide care as well as to Oregonians who receive in-home care. We are reaching out to offer help with booster shot appointments, including in-home appointments when needed.

We know that with national shortages of direct-care staff, which is also a problem in Oregon, we will still have gaps. But we feel confident that we are investing in the resources that will do the most to help the state as Omicron cases increase.

Combined, we believe these initiatives give the state the ability to be flexible and address needs at a regional level as they arise. The goal is to best deploy resources to avert a hospital-bed shortage and prevent as many infections as possible.