

Workplace COVID-19 infections on the rise in Oregon

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Information released by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) last week shows a record 108 active work site COVID-19 outbreaks with over 11,000 workers infected, the largest number since the pandemic began. There have been 61 deaths connected to these outbreaks. The number of infected work sites has risen by 19 from the 89 reported a week ago. The number of deaths rose by eight and cases by 1,172.

OHA's methodology for declaring a workplace outbreak, ostensibly to "protect privacy," is restricted to those experiencing five or more cases and with a minimum of 30 workers. Consequently, the number of infected workers and deaths is certainly higher than the official numbers given by the state. Also, using the cover of patient privacy, OHA does not report worker death by workplace, making it impossible for workers and the public at large to know which companies are seeing deadly outbreaks. If no new cases are reported in 28 consecutive days, the outbreak is considered resolved.

The state of Oregon has been experiencing a record number of COVID-19 cases over the last two months. Last week the OHA reported the sixth straight week of record high weekly cases, a daily record of 2,176 cases, and also passed a grim milestone with over 1,000 deaths since the pandemic began. The latest report listed 9,100 new cases from November 23 to November 29—a 5 percent increase over the previous week; 398 new hospitalizations—an 8 percent increase; and 86 new deaths—up from 61 deaths.

On Tuesday, health officials announced 1,294 new cases with 35 more deaths. The death toll now stands at 1,080 people and total cases is now 87,082.

The largest outbreaks are in prisons, with correctional institutions in Ontario (550 cases), Pendleton (520 cases) and Salem (192 cases) comprising the top three.

Occupying fourth place is Amazon's fulfillment center in the Portland suburb of Troutdale, with 101 COVID-19 cases. OHA first announced a COVID-19 outbreak at that warehouse on June 10, six months ago.

Distribution centers for corporations have been described as "COVID-19 hotspots." Along with Amazon, Walmart and Fred Meyer distribution warehouses, ranked eighth and ninth respectively, have been among the workplaces with the largest active outbreaks. National chains Target, Home Depot and Lowe's have also reported cases at their Oregon warehouses.

Many of the coronavirus cases are being diagnosed at farms, fruit growers, nurseries and food processing plants scattered along the agriculturally intensive Willamette Valley—with Interstate 5 stretched north-south along its length, providing an easy means for workers to travel, but guaranteeing the spread of the coronavirus. The high incidence of COVID-19 among Hispanics—they represent 40 percent of cases despite only being 13 percent of Oregon's population—flows directly from the disproportionate hiring of migrant workers from Mexico and Central America as cheap and expendable labor in these industries, in addition to their higher incarceration rate.

In May, a scandal exploded when it was revealed that a large COVID-19 infection at Townsend Farms, with two facilities located in the Portland metro area, was in fact a second outbreak. The earlier outbreak had never been announced by state or local health officials. Over four dozen workers were infected in the second outbreak and 53 in the first. At that time, 53 cases would have been the largest number of confirmed cases in a food processing facility.

According to *The Oregonian*, Democratic governor Kate Brown refused to answer questions as to whether

large workplace coronavirus infections should be kept from the public. Nor would she “address whether she would take steps to ensure workplace outbreaks of a minimum size are announced to the public.” OHA director Patrick Allen stated, “People employed in agriculture are essential workers.” Townsend Farms never shut down its line, with hundreds of workers continuing to process berries in close quarters.

Oregon’s Occupational Health and Safety Administration spokesman Aaron Corvin stated that it has received 15,000 complaints this year. A typical year would see about 2,000 complaints. The source for the additional complaints, said Corvin, are “Employers who are choosing to disregard [COVID-19] requirements.” However, there is no serious mechanism to enforce these requirements in OSHA’s Workplace Advisory Memo, issued Monday, beyond a worksite being “scheduled for inspection” after a “telephone inquiry.”

The Oregon AFL-CIO states that one in six Oregon residents have contracted COVID-19 in connection with a workplace outbreak. Despite this, as in the rest of the country, the unions have worked with the corporations in Oregon to keep nonessential workplaces humming regardless of the number of infections and deaths among workers.

Despite decades of Democratic Party domination of state government and its largest cities, Oregon is no better prepared for a surge in coronavirus infections than those controlled by the Republicans. Projections by the OHA indicate “exponential” growth with “2,000 new daily cases and 75 additional daily hospitalizations by December 24.”

The recent rise is already stretching hospital bed and ICU availability. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, in 2018, Oregon had the lowest number of hospital beds per 1,000 population in the US. While the United States as a whole had 2.4 beds per 1,000, Oregon had 1.6. Utah and New Mexico were tied at 1.8 and the District of Columbia led with only 4.4 per 1,000.



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