



House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

A VIEW FROM THE STATES, TERRITORIES, AND DISTRICT: GOVERNORS RESPOND
TO THE OMICRON VARIANT

Written Letter for the Record of

Governor Kate Brown, Oregon

January 20, 2022

Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a letter for the record regarding Oregon's COVID-19 response.

Like all states across the nation, this pandemic has posed multiple challenges for Oregon since our first positive case on February 28, 2020. Today, we are bracing for the Omicron variant to peak in our state, which arrived while we were still experiencing the tail end of a Delta surge that pushed our hospitals and health care workers to their limits. Our doctors, nurses, and health care workers are tired, and certainly Oregonians — like all Americans — are ready for a stable and consistent return of life, where the health and safety of their families is not jeopardized by COVID-19.

Fortunately, in Oregon, quick and decisive actions early on in the pandemic, along with the tremendous efforts of Oregonians to protect our communities, has helped our state fare better than most in terms of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths — and we are proud of that. We have led the country with some of the best COVID-response outcomes. We have the third lowest cumulative case rate per capita among U.S. states. The seventh lowest fatality rate.

Oregon was among the first states to limit visitation in long-term care facilities to protect our most vulnerable residents, an incredibly difficult decision that proved necessary as COVID-19 tore through our communities. Today, more than two-thirds of our population are fully vaccinated, and we have worked tirelessly to close the equity gaps in our vaccination efforts for our historically-underserved communities. And thanks to the actions of Oregonians to stay home to save lives early in the pandemic, we were able to answer New York's call for assistance and send ventilators to them in April 2020, when they were the epicenter of the crisis.

I am grateful that I am able to say today that Oregon has weathered this storm better than most throughout the pandemic and a rapid economic recovery is currently underway in our state. We come out of the past two years with lessons learned that I hope can be applied to save more lives as we continue to respond to COVID-19 and prevent the devastating impacts of future pandemics. I want to share with you some of the factors we believe helped the state of Oregon to keep our communities healthy and protected over the last two years.

QUICK, DECISIVE ACTION SAVES LIVES

From the beginning of the pandemic, Oregon has taken quick, decisive actions in response to containing the spread of COVID-19. Oregon's first case of COVID-19 was identified on

February 28, 2020. A month prior, however, as news in Asia and Europe started spreading of a novel coronavirus, the Oregon Health Authority stood up an incident management team to monitor and prepare for COVID-19 to reach our state. I stood up my Disaster Cabinet the day we identified our first case, to coordinate state agency response. Oregon was among the first 10 states to issue a stay home order in March 2020. When COVID-19 surged again in the fall of 2020, Oregon was among the first states, along with New Mexico, to issue a comprehensive statewide freeze on some businesses, gatherings, and indoor activities because we knew that quick action can make a huge difference. Learning from the spring of 2020, we took a thoughtful approach to which businesses and other industries needed to suspend indoor operations in order to save lives and protect hospital capacity. As such, as we did in March of 2020, we kept manufacturing and construction operating; this served as a lifeline to many Oregon workers.

Recognizing that supplies were stretched across the globe, I directed my Department of Administrative Services to creatively think through how to create and procure personal protective equipment. The result was astounding: In addition to PPE received from FEMA, Oregon has spent \$129 million on additional PPE during the pandemic. In March 2020, the State began distributing PPE to counties, Tribes, hospitals, and state agencies. In total, Oregon distributed 13 million surgical masks, 3.9 million N95 masks, 18.1 million KN95 masks, 1.7 million gowns, 26.6 million gloves, and 784,000 face shields. About 9 million masks were sent to K-12 school districts and schools. We used a state-purchased warehouse to distribute PPE, staffed by the Oregon National Guard.

Shortly after issuing my “Stay Home, Save Lives” order, we started working with some of the top creative agencies in our state — including Wieden+Kennedy — on a series of robust public information campaigns aimed at both informing Oregonians about COVID-19, and also bringing them together during this uncertain time. These campaigns focused on everything from how to stop the spread of COVID-19, to even offering guidance on how to make the difficult decision when necessary to limit or pause in-person operations of schools and businesses. We worked with a public relations firm specializing in cross-cultural communications, and in partnership with over 170 community-based organizations, to ensure the campaigns were transcreated — meaning, instead of direct translation of materials we adapted messages from English into 13 languages—English, Spanish, Arabic, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Chuukese, Korean, Hmong, Marshallese, Portuguese, Russian, Somali, and Vietnamese—to evoke the same emotions and carry the same intent, but in a way that would best saturate non-native English speaking communities. By transcreating, rather than simply translating, the materials aim to help community members understand the core of the campaign goals and content.

We coupled these campaigns with assistance to support those hit hardest by the safety protocols that were necessary to save lives. For instance, we issued relief to small businesses whose operations were disrupted by the pandemic —helping distribute \$227,241 on average to each

restaurant. To help keep restaurants open and operating despite decreased commercial activity, we took legislative action to allow licensed restaurants and bars to serve to-go cocktails with the passage of Senate Bill 317. And Oregon businesses stepped up, demonstrating creative ways to do curbside shopping and transforming our food scene into a “take out” haven.

Because COVID rates varied county-by-county, we tailored our approach to partner with regional governments to assess risk and implement precautions such as health and safety restrictions at a county-by-county level. Given the complex and wide-reaching ramifications of COVID-19, we always kept in mind the impact of our decisions and nuance in our response.

As the pandemic continued, we prioritized partnering with local governments, Oregon’s nine Federally Recognized Tribes, the business community, schools, and hospitals to adjust course as needed, making careful adjustments to balance the need for prevention measures with the need to support Oregon’s families and businesses through the economic impacts of the pandemic.

And with these adjustments came reflection and analysis to help us hone our strategy. We learned lessons from the Delta that helped to prepare us when the Omicron variant hit. For instance, we were one of only a few states that renewed mask requirements in August of 2021, a decision which saved lives. Oregon is currently one of nine states with statewide mask requirements.

Recognizing new variants can pop up when the world least expects them, we extended contracts with traveling health care staff so we would have surge capacity ready to support hospitals. Additionally, we have deployed the Oregon National Guard multiple times in a variety of roles, from answering phone calls about COVID-19 via our statewide 2-1-1- hotline to getting shots in arms as part of our vaccine rollout, to supporting our hospital and long-term care facility workers. I am extremely grateful to the members of the Oregon National Guard, who have repeatedly answered our call for assistance during this pandemic. I am also grateful to their families and their employers, who help make their service possible. Several of our Guard members who run their own businesses have had to suspend their work in order to serve.

CENTERING EQUITY AND PRIORITIZING OREGON’S MOST VULNERABLE

Throughout the pandemic, our response in Oregon has sought to get support to the Oregonians hit hardest for the pandemic. That has meant centering equity in our policy decisions.

In Oregon and nationwide, Black, Indigenous, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Tribal, and communities of color were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, exacerbating the racial disparities that existed in our healthcare system, housing market, and economy even before the pandemic.

Addressing these disparities was a key imperative in a successful statewide COVID-19 response. With the help of Oregon's Racial Justice Council, which I first convened in September 2020, we have brought together community leaders and sought their input to help apply a racial equity lens to all of Oregon's policy and funding decisions — from healthcare, to housing to economic recovery. This helped guide pivotal moments in the pandemic, such as Oregon's vaccine prioritization process and rollout last year, and how to reach communities where they are at with culturally appropriate information and a vaccine, to our prioritization and distribution of rapid at-home tests today. Let me be clear at the outset: Oregon has not always met our goals for equity in the past two years. But setting equity as a goal and a guiding principle has helped us to recognize when we are falling short, and to make adjustments to our policies and procedures.

One way this played out was in how Oregon approached prioritizing vaccines during the early days of the rollout, when vaccine doses were painfully limited. It was clear by the winter of 2021 that children desperately needed to return to the learning environment that served them best — in-person, classroom instruction. With children not eligible for vaccination, and many educators across the state and nation fearful of returning to in-person instruction, I made the decision to prioritize vaccinations for K-12 teachers and school-based staff alongside Oregonians 65 and older. Oregon was the only state to do this, and it did not come without political pushback. However, a lack of in-person learning was impacting all of Oregon children — but more so children from families with low incomes and children of color and their families — prioritizing educator vaccinations was vital to making sure these kids didn't fall further behind. Several states, including the federal government under President Biden's directive, followed Oregon's lead.

As Oregon heads into our 2022 Legislative Session, the work of the Racial Justice Council, which has just been legally codified as a permanent aspect of Oregon's state government, has helped produce our equity-focused workforce development and economic recovery package, Future Ready Oregon 2022. Oregon's economic recovery efforts, just like every aspect of our COVID-19 response, will focus on communities of color, rural communities, and other communities hit hardest by this pandemic.

In Oregon, we make an effort to center a racial equity lens in everything we do, and I urge all states to do the same.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL

Another key aspect of our successes in Oregon is our continued communication and collaboration with regional and federal partners, as well as with Oregon's nine federally-recognized Tribes. In the spring of 2020, as states were looking to lift stay home orders, I texted my fellow governors to the North and South — California Governor Gavin

Newsom and Washington Governor Jay Inslee — to see if they would be interested in collaborating on reopening plans. At that point in time, it was clear the virus knew no borders, and sharing plans for reopening our economies, which are already linked by the common geography of our states, made a lot of sense. From that text chain grew a regionally collaborative approach on multiple fronts: we stood up the Western States Pact, and later a Western States workgroup to review safety protocols as vaccines and mononuclear treatments came online.

On the federal front, the Biden administration, as well as our congressional partners, have done a tremendous job of maintaining close contact with state governments, who truly are on the front lines responding to this pandemic. I urge the federal government to continue this collaborative relationship of seeking advice and input from states.

These past few years have been tough for all of us. But in Oregon, we see a light at the end of the tunnel. That is largely thanks to the collaborative spirit of Oregonians. From the teachers, healthcare workers, grocery workers, and public servants, to business leaders, to families, Oregonians came together to slow the spread of a deadly disease. I am proud of the resiliency that Oregonians have displayed. I hope these achievements and reflections can be of service to the nation as we continue to chart our next steps together.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter for the record.

Governor Kate Brown of Oregon