

Oregon businesses fear being publicly identified as COVID-19 workplace outbreak

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Freres Lumber in Lyons knew of one employee who tested positive in August for COVID-19. But the next month, the state identified Freres as the site of an outbreak — reporting they'd had five and then later 14 cases.

Businesses argue they're being stigmatized by a state reporting system they describe as unfair and misleading. State health officials say they're following their long-used reporting system, but its impact is magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic's attention.

The state's workplace outbreak numbers do not actually tell the public how many employees are sick. For each business, they also include employees' family members, roommates or other close contacts of the workers who tested positive.

"A quick answer is (the) OHA should be very careful and clear on how they define 'associated,' and not just group every infected person who is related to a worker from a workplace outbreak as part of that outbreak," said Chun-huei Chi, Oregon State University Director for the Center for Global Health.

OHA Deputy State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Jeanne said the agency's tracking and reporting of workplace outbreaks is the department's standard practice for infectious diseases. But the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a unique spotlight to it.

"I think that's kind of our best practice there," Jeanne said. "It's really kind of our routine approach."

The methodology for reporting workplace outbreaks varies from state to state, meaning the reported numbers could be skewing the true size and scope of outbreaks.

Oregon publicly reports workplace outbreaks of more than five cases at businesses with at least 30 employees. Michigan, for example, counts two infections at a workplace



Information about COVID-19 is continuously displayed in a break room at Freres Lumber on, Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020 in Lyons, Oregon.

(PHOTO: ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL)

as an outbreak. Iowa doesn't publicly report outbreaks of fewer than 10% of employees.

"Using that word 'outbreak' is a misnomer," Freres Lumber human resource manager Marilyn Gueltzow said. "I don't know why they don't just use 'These are the cases. This employer has 430 employees and there's a reported five cases associated,' rather than labeling it as an outbreak.

"It's definitely not fair. In our business environment this year, it could cause people to lose business."

Standard practice for reporting

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Oregon in January, the Oregon Health Authority has led the tracking of the novel coronavirus in Oregon and disseminated information about where the disease is prevalent.

In April, the OHA started reporting outbreaks of COVID-19 at long-term care facilities. And in May it started reporting what it calls "large workplace outbreaks," which include workplace outbreaks of more than five cases for employers with at least 30 workers.

"We've got a pretty standard practice, not just for COVID, but all the infectious diseases that we track," Jeanne said.



Information about COVID-19 is continuously displayed in a break room at Freres Lumber on, Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020 in Lyons, Oregon.

(PHOTO: ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, local public health authorities have the legal authority for investigating disease outbreaks, but there are no federal guidelines on how to trace cases associated with an outbreak.

Chi said classifying people who are infected with COVID-19 who have been associated with the workplace is a gray area in epidemiological reporting.

He said knowing how many people in total are infected from a workplace outbreak is helpful in an epidemiological investigation in tracking how the virus has spread from that workplace.

But Chi said cases associated with a workplace outbreak should provide clear evidence the person who was infected has no other exposure, including their workplace or personal contacts, to be counted.

Being identified can hurt businesses

Freres Lumber in Lyons saw its workforce drop significantly during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March it had 475 employees, according to president Rob Freres. But orders dwindled so much and they ran out of room for storage that the company shut down for a week in May. The number of workers fell to about 400 by June.

Since then, the company has struggled to hire more employees to get back up to full production levels.

Gueltzow said being named an outbreak has made it harder to find new employees and retain its current ones.

Gueltzow said the company has been diligent in its protections against the virus, including requiring face masks, plastic dividers between employees when they can't maintain six feet distance, giving employees who had contact with a person known to have had COVID-19 14 paid days off, and having employees eat lunch in their cars or outdoors to stay separate.

But on Sept. 23, the company was added to the OHA's weekly list of workplace outbreaks. The OHA reported Freres had its first case Aug. 16 and by Sept. 5 it had five.

"And I will tell you that from the 8/16 magical date that they started tracking, we had one positive," Gueltzow said. "And we did have three other people who were out, but it was family issues. It was their child or their wife."

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Gueltzow said the company learned the wife of one employee contracted COVID-19 and their employee let them know. That employee was given sick leave for two weeks even though he has tested negative.

The spouse, it turns out, works for Amazon in Salem, and she was also counted in their case total.

"She's not on (our) site and her husband is not infected, but we're going to get hit with that case," Gueltzow said.

In the meantime, the outbreak at Freres continues to grow, according to the OHA.

The lumber company is now credited with 14 cases, even though it only knows of one employee who has tested positive for COVID-19 since Aug. 18.

Getting off the list

Counties perform contacting tracing to help limit the spread by identifying those who were close contacts of someone known to be infected. The counties ask those infected for information such as where they work and who the infected person has been around and reports it to the OHA, which adds the individual cases to their workplace totals.

To get off the list of active outbreaks, a company must be free of cases for the past 28 days. Getting off the list of closed outbreaks requires 56 days without a case.

Some companies in Oregon have been on the list since the beginning of the pandemic and, due to their size, are unlikely to get off it.

There were 75 current workplace outbreaks identified in the OHA's Oct. 14 report, representing more than 2,000 cases. Nine childcare facilities were credited with 63 cases.

The OHA reported that there have been 24 deaths associated with workplace outbreaks in the state, but it has declined to attribute those cases to specific employers.

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