

# Making History: Meet the Women Who Helped Launch a Vaccine Clinic at PDX

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If you had to build a town in less than two weeks – with traffic that flowed without disruption, clear logistical organization and roles for its residents, and new buildings and electricity – could you do it? That’s what the Port of Portland was asked to do to get a vaccine clinic up and running in about 10 days. For Kama Simonds, it was a brand-new challenge in her 15 years at the Port.

While Simonds’ day-to-day role is as the Port’s media relations manager, she also shares monthly rotational duties as the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Manager. This person is responsible for organizing a team to respond to emergencies at PDX, should they occur. They aren’t called upon often, but each EOC manager is trained in leadership, operations and logistics, and they know how to get things done quickly – like set up a vaccine clinic in just over a week.

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Fortunately, when she received her first-ever call as EOC manager, Simonds had a creative group of teammates ready to support her. “It was a bit daunting, as it’s not something we had done before, but I was so fortunate to work with a great group of people who continue to pour so much effort, energy and heart into the project.”

It truly took a village to build this mini city in the PDX Red Economy Lot, and much of the heavy lifting came from the Port’s maintenance team.





“The Port maintenance team did an outstanding job putting up mini-mobile trailers, lights, Wi-Fi and other facilities all initially relying on generators. Over the first month, they also hardwired these facilities,” said Nora Yotsov, who has worked closely with OHSU since January to coordinate and help launch this mass vaccination clinic.

Sheila Washington oversaw the maintenance team’s work, which also included designing, printing and installing signage in a week. While things got stressful at times, there was no effort more important to the maintenance supervisor. “It’s important to me that we’re able to play a role in helping recover from the pandemic. Setting up the vaccine clinic lets us do our part to help things get back to normal and is a really good way for us to use our expertise to help support the community.”



The team on their first weekend of launching the vaccine clinic at the PDX Red Lot (Front row (L to R): Nora Yotsov, Sheila Washington, and Kama Simonds; Back row: Fred Myer, Steven Koester, and Michael Huggins)

## A Team of Women Leading the Way

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OHSU runs the clinic – overseeing registration, staffing, eligibility and the vaccine distribution process –while the Port provides the location and logistical expertise. Red Cross volunteers supported the effort to get the vaccine clinic off the ground and running.

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A pleasant surprise for those working on this project is how many women are leading the effort. From Port and OHSU leadership, to Red Cross partners, so many women are driving the show.





Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/snkaBCUSOJ4>

In fact, a conversation between two women at the Port and OHSU sparked the collaboration. As **OHSU shared in a news story**, Abby Tibbs, OHSU’s vice president for public affairs and marketing, regularly talks with Kristen Leonard, chief public affairs officer at the Port. During one of their conversations, Tibbs mentioned the logistical challenges with vaccine distribution.

Leonard was quick to offer the Port’s support, adding that “there’s no more important issue to the Port than helping get Oregon back on its feet again.” The rest, as they say, is history.



Kama Simonds (left) and Abby Tibbs (right) oversee operations on the day the PDX Red Lot vaccine clinic launched

“It’s been impressive to see how many women are involved in leading this operation. This is something I notice as I work in a male-dominated field,” said Washington. “I believe some of the relationships we’ve built through this process will continue beyond the clinic’s operations. We’ve grown to respect what each other does and enjoy each other’s company.”

Since the site launched on January 21, OHSU has dispensed nearly 80,000 vaccinations. More than 1 million people in Oregon have received at least one vaccine dose, and millions more will get the opportunity in the coming months.

## **Adapting on the Fly**

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While the effort to launch the vaccine clinic was heroic, the team has faced its fair share of challenges. As Yotsov notes, the weather has been one of our biggest hurdles. “Weather has been a tremendous challenge from heavy rainstorms, the snow and ice storm in February, lightning and wind have and continue to make an outdoor operation challenging. We are looking forward to warmer days.”

Planes would loudly roar overhead as the rain came down in steady drops, soaking through the jackets and shoes of the volunteers on site. Wind disrupted and pushed over cones and tents, and OSHU was forced to cancel appointments the weekend of the snowstorm to keep everyone safe.



For Washington, however, the most challenging part came at the beginning. It takes time to figure out the best ways to work with a new partner in a new capacity. The Port, after all, is an expert in air travel, moving goods, and industrial development – not public health. But our years running an airport meant we had plenty of experience adapting to changing conditions. “There were a lot of hands on deck, and at the start it wasn’t clear who relates to who and what their role was. We all knew how important this was for the community, and we were all working toward a shared goal. We had to learn to trust each other.”

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As that trust grew, the puzzles became easier to solve, and Simonds was grateful to be part of a collaboration that leaned into the challenges. “Trading messages and comments, laughs and frustrations and doing some major ‘what if we did...’ out-of-the-box thinking was downright fun!”





Red Cross volunteer MaryJane Rose



Yotsov and Simonds during a shift

## **The Rewards Far Outweigh the Struggles**

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For all the women involved in this project, the reward of seeing people react to getting vaccinated far outweighs any obstacles during the process. “This effort is the largest ray of hope towards recovery,” Yotsov shared. “Now we can clearly see recovery around the corner with the expedited timeline, and that is extremely rewarding.”



Maureen Minister, who has served as one of the Port’s on-site operations managers in recent weeks, agrees. “Vaccinations are critically important to ending this pandemic and, after a year of feeling totally powerless, it has felt great to be able to support the efforts of getting the Portland metro area population vaccinated. I am looking forward to the day that my friends and family are all vaccinated so I can see them again and not worry about them getting sick!”

Jennifer Stacey, who took on a similar role to Minister in recent weeks, echoed these comments. “Seeing the vaccine clinic in operation for the first time was truly awe-inspiring. So many people working together, volunteering their time and energy, to save lives and help end the pandemic. I feel honored to represent the Port in such a capacity.”

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In a year where all of us are witnessing history, these Port, OHSU and Red Cross women are making sure the roughest times become a thing of the past. As we close out Women’s History Month, we’re thankful for all they – and the many, many others on the team – have done to launch this mini city in an empty airport parking lot and vaccinate our communities.

As Simonds so eloquently concluded, “Vaccination is the way we get to return to hugging our loved ones, having dinner inside with friends and without worry, and seeing one another in person in the office.”



Photo courtesy of OHSU



Photo courtesy of OHSU



