

- Good afternoon. My name is Michelle Shoresman, and today is Wednesday, January 27th, 2021. Thank you for watching today's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon we have two speakers for you. We will begin with Executive Director of Long-Term Care Ombudsman Services of San Luis Obispo County, Ms. Karen Jones, and she will be followed by County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. They'll take questions after providing their prepared statements. Thank you once again to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb. And now I'd like to introduce Executive Director of Long-Term Care Ombudsman Services of SLO County, Ms. Karen Jones.

- Thank you, Michelle. Hello, my name is Karen Jones and I'm the Executive Director of Long-Term Care Ombudsman Services of San Luis Obispo County. We are a nonprofit organization that has provided ombudsman or advocacy services to long-term care facility residents since 1978. From the beginning of this pandemic, we have worked with San Luis Obispo County public health on COVID issues for residents of skilled nursing and residential care facilities. For the past few months, we've been concentrating our efforts on the federal facility vaccine program that is administered through the CVS and Walgreens pharmacies. This program provides vaccine clinics, sorry at each care facility to residents, staff and facility associated individuals separate from the efforts of the County. I'm happy to report that the facility vaccination pace in our County is much higher than in many locations around the nation where the delay is a challenge. To date all the skilled nursing facilities have had two vaccine clinics with the final vaccination clinic being scheduled. There are approximately 170 residential facilities in San Luis Obispo County, and we expect all of them to have their first clinic by February 15.

We are concerned about the high number of long-term care facility staff who choose not to get vaccinated for one reason or another. This is not unique to San Luis Obispo County but it is clear that there is a lot of misinformation even within the medical community about the COVID 19 vaccine. Combating misinformation continues to be a challenge across the nation with many agencies working on a solution. For the health and safety of our entire community, I encourage everyone to get clinical facts about the vaccine from reputable sources such as the CDC or the County public health department.

In addition to the federal program for care facilities, I think it is important to mention the San Luis Obispo County vaccine task force. This group is made up of representatives from public and private businesses or agencies who have a stake in the vaccine process. There are representatives for all age groups, abilities, and employment sectors on the task force. The group is meeting regularly to review County vaccination efforts along with reviewing the state vaccine priority groups. My role in that group is to represent the needs of care facility residents, including skilled nursing and residential facilities for the elderly. I have also been contacted by several unlicensed assisted living facilities for seniors to assist in planning vaccines for their residents. In my role on the task force, I will continue to keep

vulnerable individuals in mind as we plan for each step in the County vaccination process. While I have the microphone, I want to thank all the staff at County public health for their efforts during what is arguably the most difficult time to work in public health. I am really glad to have them provide the assistance we need to move through the pandemic. I'm happy to answer any questions and I'd like to introduce Dr. Borenstein. Thank you.

- Thank you, Karen. Good afternoon, I hope everyone is staying safe. We are having some weather conditions and I will talk about the impacts of that on our vaccination efforts. Lemme start with giving you the current situation with COVID in our County. I'd like to first note that today is actually the one-year anniversary today of when our core group of public health staff at our public health department opened our County health agency department operation center. One year later with the help of many individuals both internal to the County and external but especially our emergency operation center which has been open since March, those same six, eight, 10 individuals who've been at this for a year continue to work long and hard to protect the health and wellbeing of our community members. And so, I really did wanna give a shout out to my team. You don't know their names, you see my face but there is a core group that have been working tirelessly seven days a week, long hours into the evening to try to help our community with handling this pandemic. With this pandemic, we have now gotten above 17,300 cases in SLO County.

That means more than 6% of all the residents have tested positive. There may well be more, but we now have gone beyond 5% where it's 6% who have had COVID 19 disease since it started a year ago. And with most of those having contracted in just the last three months. In January alone, we saw a 60% over December and we're not through the month yet. So, our case counts remain high but there is good news on the horizon. We are starting to see that this high number of cases are beginning to slow down. We're seeing this across the state as well and we are hopeful and believe that this is a beginning of a trend. We do still have quite a few people in the hospital and especially in intensive care, we have 16 individuals and that is nearly half of our entire intensive care staffed bed capacity that has COVID patients in them today. So, while we are making movement on the case front you can see the chart. Hospitalizations, ICU admissions and deaths do tend to lag behind, so we are looking forward to seeing those turn the corner as well. With respect to deaths, unfortunately every day we have been reporting more deaths and today we are at 161 members of our community who have lost their lives to this disease and dozens more who are in a status that is awaiting final determination of death that we believe will be added to that all to high account. So once again, I absolutely want to sincerely say to the family members of those who have lost their lives from this disease, our hearts are with you and our condolences go out to you and your families.

As I mentioned, we do have good news, the cases are dropping and the projection of what is going to look like in a month's time with respect to ICU admissions is good. And it is on

that basis that the state has been able to lift this regional stay at home order for not just Southern California but statewide. There were three regions that remained under that stay at home order up until Monday. And the governor announced based on that four-week projection of what the ICU bed capacity will look like in our region allows us to come to remove that stay at home order. In SLO County we have never hit that metric of 15%. In fact, today we're at 47% availability, but as you know we were part of the Southern California region and things in our region are looking optimistic for four weeks out from now. Therefore, we're able to get out from under the regional stay at home order.

However, that said, we are still in the most restrictive tier of the state's blueprint for a safer economy. So, with the withdrawal of the stay at home order, we go back into the purple tier as is true for almost the entire state, but this allows a number of things to move forward. So outdoor operations for dining, for gyms and fitness centers, which have been operating in that fashion. Museums, zoos, personal care services, everyone can go get their hair cut now. Nail salons, massage aesthetics, a host of personal care services can now resume indoors under modified conditions with all the protection still in place, and retailers continue to operate but still at the reduced capacity. A full list of what services may be open and in what fashion is available at ReadySLO.org and the place to look is "Guidance for Safe Operations".

Also, with respect to being in purple tier, I want to remind people that this is not license to go and get together in large numbers with your friends and family. It continues to be a difficult time. We will get through this but right now we continue to ask you to gather like a BOSS. So brief, outdoors, small gatherings and only if you're symptom-free. So brief, less than two hours; gathering outdoors, anyone who is sick, please stay away. And also, we recommend that these types of gatherings do not involve singing, shouting, chanting all the ways in which this respiratory illness can be more readily transmitted. We thank the community for continuing to endure these measures that we've been under for quite a long time, but they are still very important. We do not want to see ourselves have another surge before we can get through the vaccination process. So again, that means continuing to wear your mask in all settings where other people around, outside of your household, keeping six foot distance, get tested if you've been exposed or have symptoms and refrain from social gatherings, keep to your social bubble.

We are however not satisfied with the status quo. We want to as quickly as possible move from purple to red and onward, orange, yellow. It is going to take some doing, our numbers in terms of the case counts, which still determine a county's tier status is still quite high. So, this week we were at 65 cases per 100,000 population per day. If you remember, we have to get below 20 to get to the red tier. The good news is however that our adjusted case rate has a 50% adjustment. That means we are doing very robust testing in this County still, and so our adjusted case rate is down to 32.5. But still we have to get

from that metric to 19 to get to red and considerably lower to move further forward through the tier structure.

The other metrics I will remind you, it's been some time since we've talked about these blueprint metrics, is case rate but it's also positivity rate. In this County we are doing well, we have a 7.6 or red tier positivity rate. And the other metric of note is that for health equity. So the lowest core tile in terms of medical and other economic vulnerabilities are having the same positivity rate at actually 7.5%, slightly lower. We are one of only a very few counties that are meeting that health equity metric and we're very happy about that. So now we just really need to work together to get our case rate down so that we can move forward. Let me move on to vaccine. That is our ticket over the coming months.

And first I want to talk a little bit about the task force. So we have continued to meet on a weekly basis. It's about 30 people who represent all sectors of our community, business, faith, education, first responders, and on and on. Many sectors that are represented on the task force and these individuals have been a tremendous help to us in helping us make decisions about the vaccine rollout and helping us message to all sectors of the community as to the decisions that are being made and why they're being made. So with this group, we had made the decision to move forward into Phase 1B Tier 1 with vaccinating individuals 75 and older. We had already done quite a bit of vaccination of Phase 1A, the first grouping was healthcare workers as well as residents in long-term care facilities. We believe that we have gotten through most of that first phase and we're making some real progress in this next group of individuals aged 75 and over.

We have also been hearing from quite a few anxious community members especially the group 65 to 74 who are getting messages that don't necessarily align across our County and the state and other jurisdictions. Also, for people with medical conditions, we hear you, we're sympathetic we to move forward to that group just as quickly as possible. But the reality is vaccine allocation is not sufficient to give it to all of these groups at the same time. So we made the decision in this County to start with 75 and older and the group 65 to 74 are in the next grouping, still in Phase 1B, still in that first tier but we have subdivided that tier to get through 75 plus and then move on to the next age category as well as some other critical firstline workers. Just again so you know that why we made that decision, over 26,000 individuals in this County aged 75 plus, another 38,000 in just that one decade of life between age 65 and 74. So we're doing this in a sequential fashion. We know that the state just very recently again said that vaccination is eligible for people 65 and above and we want folks in our community to tune into the messaging that we're putting out there and to try to avoid the confusion. So that information is available at RecoverSLO.org/vaccines.

We also want to pay special attention to our Latin X population. They have been disproportionately impacted by this disease. Whereas one third of all cases have been among Hispanic individuals, they represent only 22% of the population. And so, we're

looking forward to the opportunity to move especially into the food and agricultural sector as quickly as possible. And we're also trying to make information available on our website and through other mechanisms increasingly in Spanish.

So where are we with the vaccination process? As I mentioned, we are well into this Phase 1B, the early part of Phase 1B, our supply is our limiting factor. We have through last week, which is only a month, we've received 22,660 doses of vaccine, of that over 13,000 are first doses. All this information is available on the website as well as being shown on screen. Over 10,000 people through the end of last week have received a first dose vaccine and quite a few have actually completed their series and gotten a second dose. So, 22% of that 10,500 some have now gotten two doses. This information is now available on our website and we encourage people to keep posted as to where we are.

What we don't have on the website but I can share with you from time to time as I get the information from our partners, from hospitals, from state facilities is that they too are continuing to vaccinate their staff. They are well into second doses for their healthcare workers at our local hospitals. We also, as you heard from Karen Jones are seeing great progress in getting all the residential care facility residents vaccinated as well as their staff. So some of those especially skilled nursing facilities are seeing now second doses start to come around and we're getting into not we but the federal partnership, the pharmacy partnership is getting into more and more of the smaller residential facilities long-term care settings for the elderly. So that is all good news.

I do wanna mention a new is that the state is making some changes in their vaccine allocation process and a couple of announcements that the governor made earlier this week that we're still trying to sort out ourselves and get clearer understanding of, one of those is that they are planning to hire a third party administrator to make vaccination doses available to counties. So, we're gonna be trying to better understand what that would look like. They also have rolled out a new website called My Turn that is to notify people of when they are eligible to receive a vaccine. At this moment in time, they're doing this on a pilot basis and they're only operating in LA and San Diego counties. So people who are looking for that opportunity to enroll or to get messages about their eligibility in our County, that is not an option at this time but the state does plan to progress with this system to make it available on a more statewide basis. As I mentioned, we need to better understand if this is going to be something that will subsume our existing appointment schedule or if it is an option for us and we're trying to get more information on that.

In the meantime, we continue with our imperfect but robust system of making appointments. Why I say imperfect is we recognize the challenges that are before those people who try to make an appointment. The volume of the demand greatly outstrips the capacity. We're hoping as we start to move into additional weeks of availability for our senior population that it will become a little bit easier, but next, tomorrow at 9:00 AM is the

third opportunity on a weekly basis for people to get appointments for next week's vaccines. The reason we only do this once a week is because we only get vaccine allocation once a week. I would love to be able to schedule people out for a month and so people can feel assured their vaccine is coming. We have made the decision, unlike some other places rather than cancel appointments when we don't get adequate vaccine is to only make those appointments on the basis of the vaccine supply that we have. So, for the time being we have this once a week appointment process available mostly online but also through phone support for those who do not have online access to an appointment system. So new appointments will be available tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM, please don't stay up all night trying to get in that queue. And we anticipate having well over 5,000 appointments for first doses available to people, especially again in this age group of 75 plus.

With that and I wanna talk about the vaccination sites. So, we opened this week, our third planned vaccine location, Arroyo Grande High School has been operating for its third day today providing vaccines to hundreds of individuals in South County. Paso Robles Event Center is in its second week of administering doses in the North County. And our SLO site is in a bit of flux at the moment so let me address this in a couple of ways. So we had a plan to move our SLO vaccine site on Monday, next Monday to Cuesta College where we have a lot more room, we can accommodate people with special needs, more parking, more in car vaccination as needed, just better space, more indoor space. We really have outgrown the space that has kept us operating for a month now, but we really need to move from where we are right now which is right behind the public health department building.

Because of the limitations of that location, we had to cancel today at the SLO site only because of the weather. Just in a short period of time before this meeting, before my coming before you we just made the decision on the basis of the weather predictions for tomorrow, and the fact that our existing tents have gotten torn up at our existing site that we also need to cancel for tomorrow. This is done not lightly and with a heavy heart as we know how people we are striving to get that appointment and to keep that appointment. But I want to reassure the people who had appointments today and have appointments scheduled tomorrow, that we have been, and we'll be in communication about rescheduling those appointments for next week. So, today's people heard about it yesterday, tomorrow's people will hear about it in the coming minutes to hours. So please stay tuned.

The additional move that we are making which has everything to do with weather is that we've decided to move early to our Cuesta site. So instead of waiting till Monday, the people who have Friday appointments at 2156 Sierra Way will need to have their appointments done at Cuesta College, and they too will be getting detailed information about that transition. The last thing that I want to talk about his second doses, this has been a challenge with inadequate vaccine. It is a constant balancing act between trying to

get more people vaccinated and get at least that first dose into people which has high effectively, but we also didn't want to leave people hanging for their second dose. We now have heard from the Centers for Disease Control who've put out more specific recommendations that the second dose should be administered within six weeks of the first dose. So, in a perfect world, if you've got a Pfizer dose it would be three weeks later, you'd get your second dose. And if you got Moderna, it would be four weeks later. We are asking our first dose recipients for patience and understanding that we have less second doses available, that we have less scheduled appointments available but we will do everything we can to meet that CDC recommendation to get people taken care of not in three or four weeks but by six weeks out. If people miss that point in time either because they were unable to make the appointment or if our vaccine allocation decreases and we're not able to meet that goal, I do want people to understand that they do not need to start the vaccine series over, and we do still believe that there will be a high level of effectiveness and immune response even if that second dose is delayed further. So, with that, I will open it to questions.

- [Speaker 1] So thank you, Dr. Borenstein. I had a question in regards to some of the smaller communities that have been hit pretty hard by the virus, San Miguel, Shandon or Oceano and was wondering if there was any specific outreach to those in particular, some people may not be getting the message in those communities.

- We do have a group that's focused on particularly Latinos as well as ag workers. There's been over the course of this pandemic, a lot of messaging, a lot of public information, radio shows, call-ins, brochures, door to door in some cases. So we continue to really try to emphasize communities whether it's Latin X or others who may not be getting their information in the same ways, or as routinely or vigorously, as you know, turning into a news station or picking up the newspaper. Social media certainly is also one of the mechanisms we use. We are going to be moving into having the opportunity for more mobile testing coming online. That is coming forward in the near term we think, from the state. And again, with the vaccination process, we're really gonna be using our task force members as well as our own internal information resources to try to push out information.

- [Speaker 1] And having had a couple of conversations recently with teachers who are just curious about when they might see vaccines, any sense of timing for them?

- Yeah. So partly this goes to this uncertainty that we've started to hear in the last couple of days about age 65. Are they gonna move forward at the same time as the education sector as well as other sectors like food and ag and first responders? Because we think we're a few weeks off from that, we hope to get clarity in two to three to four weeks on that, but that group is absolutely still in their earliest sectors that would be moving forward. At this time, we cannot predict the exact timing.

- [Speaker 1] And then in reference to the earlier conversation about skilled nursing and making sure that those facilities are staying safe, have there been outbreaks there that we heard about earlier or has that died down?

- No, some of the outbreaks have turned the curve and that is great news. We've had all probably of our skilled nursing facilities have had at least one large outbreak. Most of those have since cleared, we are still experiencing it in some locations as well as some of these smaller facilities. The number of outbreaks that we are managing and working with the facilities on at this time remains high. I think we hit a peak in the last week of something like 36 and we're down to about 28 now so we're making progress, but still a very high number of outbreaks in these facilities.

- [Speaker 2] Question for you, Dr. Borenstein, this was emailed in, he says it's actually a three-part question. I'm going to take it in two parts just for my helping me out. The first part, and you've addressed part of this. "Do you believe the state's changes to the vaccine distribution plan will help ease the overall confusion with the public?"

- I honestly don't understand or have enough information at this time as to what the state's plans are, I think that is evolving. So, I don't have a really quality answer for that question at this time. We'll certainly we'll be back with you as we begin to get more information about what it's gonna look like.

- [Speaker 2] And the rest of this question is how long do you think it will take to get out of stage 1B, and when do you think the average person will be eligible?

- Predictions of vaccine supply and the uptake in different sectors is something that is very challenging to predict. In very general terms I think we're still looking at summer as the earliest to get to the general population. Thanks.

- [Speaker 3] In reference to just the national announcement about trying to ramp up and get more vaccines available, do you have any sense of basically the positive feeling about that happening and moving quicker for the public or is it hard to say?

- Again, I don't really have any insights into the manufacturing speed or process. So, at this time I'm really not able to say what the vaccine allocation is gonna look like at a local level going forward.

- [Speaker 3] Okay. Thank you.

- Thanks.

- Thank you everyone for being here and tuning in online. Before I move on to my usual reminders, I just want to reiterate what Dr. Borenstein said about changes to the SLO vaccine clinic site over the next few days. Appointments for the SLO clinic for tomorrow, Thursday will be canceled but moved to our new location at Cuesta College next week.

Friday appointments two days from now will remain on Friday but the location for those appointments will change. Those will move to the Cuesta College site. And all of the folks that have appointments over the next two days will be communicated with via their preferred method of communication for the changes to their particular appointments. Once again, our phone assistance center is now open seven days a week from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Staff at the center are available to answer questions from members of the public and to help individuals make appointments for the vaccination clinics if they do not have access to the internet or a computer, or if they just have trouble using a computer. We also continue to maintain our recorded public health information line. ReadySLO.org remains your main online source of information about our county's response to COVID-19. However, we also have recently created a series of new web pages about vaccine and its local distribution at RecoverSLO.org/vaccines. There you can find out the risk groups currently able to be vaccinated, and information about what groups will be next, as well as sign up for an appointment to get your own vaccine. You can also subscribe to email alerts on that page as well. COVID-19 testing appointments remain available at five locations around the County in San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay, Grover Beach, Paso Robles, and Nipomo. Please go to ReadySLO.org for the most up-to-date information and links to make testing appointments. Finally, you can watch these briefings live on our county's YouTube channel or on cable channel 13. And we rebroadcast these briefings on public access channel 21 at 8:00 AM, 5:00 PM and midnight every day until the next briefing occurs. Thank you once again for being informed, stay safe and dry out there and we'll see you next Wednesday, February 3rd, at 3:15 PM.