

- Good afternoon. My name is Michelle Shoresman, and today is Wednesday, February 10th, 2021. Thank you for watching today's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 Media Briefing. This afternoon, we will hear from San Luis Obispo County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. She will take questions after her prepared statement. Thank you once again to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb. And now I'd like to introduce County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you, and good afternoon. Happy February, and indeed things are going in a pretty good direction this month but let me first lay the framework for where we are with this disease in our county. We're at 18,838 cases today. So getting close to the 20,000 mark, this means that almost 7% of our population have at some point been confirmed to have been infected with COVID. This is a market increase in recent months with the past two months accounting for 11,000 of those cases. We are seeing downward trends though, as you can see on this slide, this is our 14 day average case count. We are very much on the decline in terms of cases. Our active cases today are just over 1000, 1018 and that is down from an all time high that exceeded 3000. So that is good news.

We also are seeing progress in our positivity rate, which has dropped from an all time high of over 11% to 5.9% last week and 4.5% this week. And I will touch on that again a little bit later. Our ICU capacity remains at about the same place it was maybe a little bit worse this week with 58% of our beds in use, but our numbers of individuals with COVID have been trending slightly downward, and our hospitalizations overall have been also trending downward. We were seeing for a number of weeks, 50s or even into the 60s of number of our residents in hospital beds due to COVID. And in the past few days that number has been in the 30s between regular hospital beds and intensive care, so we hope that this trend continues.

I also wanna talk about the deaths that we continue to see, however, in this county as you can see, they have risen ever since Thanksgiving unabated. Unfortunately, we hit a milestone this week of exceeding 200 deaths from COVID of our county residents. 118 of those have occurred in the 2021 year. So this has been a really rough time for our community for our families who have experienced this preventable loss of life. 22 additional community members have died from what we expect to add to that total number. And in the past week alone, 13 individuals have died confirmed from COVID. So, as I've said, these are not just numbers, these are families, these are people who did not need to lose their lives. And with every time I

come before the public I want to remind you that it is your neighbors, your friends, your families that you are protecting when you continue to do all of the things that are necessary to prevent spreading this disease. So please, continue doing that so that we can see a turn in this most awful of metrics related to COVID, which is our death rate.

On the vaccine front, we continue to do all that we can, we continue to see a wide diversity between the amount of vaccine we have and the demand for that vaccine. But that said over the past month, we believe we are now well into vaccinating the majority of 75 people of the age of 75 or older, and we're well into vaccinating them what their second doses as well as our health care workers. So I did want to address, we are getting questions about when in the cycle of vaccination people are protected from this vaccine. So after a first day maybe a week to 10 days out, there is some protection, it's probably about 50% reduced likelihood of becoming infected. At 14 days out from that first dose, you may see an 80% effectiveness but it is not until you've received your second dose and two weeks after that that you would have the full level of protection that we are seeing from the vaccines that we have available, that is the Pfizer and the Moderna vaccine differ by one percentage point, but largely 94, 95% effectiveness of the vaccine when you've received two doses and two weeks after that second dose.

So speaking of second doses, when can individuals get that second dose? We continue to hear from people who are anxious about whether and how they can make that appointment for the second dose. If they've received their vaccine from us, they will be notified. The timing again is 21 days, or no sooner than three weeks after you've received a first dose of the Pfizer vaccine or 28 days or four weeks after you've received a Moderna dose. In general, however, and according to the centers for disease control and prevention, if it lingers a little bit longer and goes as far out as six weeks, you will still have the full effect of this vaccine. Even if it goes longer than that, it is likely to result in very high effectiveness. You do not need to restart the series or get a booster dose. We try to get and make appointments available for everyone to get in between that three and six week interval. But even if for whatever reasons you need to delay, there is still a very high level of effectiveness and appointments will be available for that second dose. However, where can you get that second dose, is a bit trickier.

We've had quite a few inquiries of people who moved here from other places where they started the series who maybe took themselves on a road trip with their

family to get a vaccine in a place that wasn't checking as closely as us, got their vaccine at a pharmacy or French Hospital. So what we are asking of people who have started the series but need a second dose is please go back to the place that you got your first dose, the way the vaccine allocation system works is we only get as many doses to give second doses as we get first doses. We will accommodate those uncommon occurrences of people who have moved across the country and have evidence that they've gotten a first dose or moved from another state, but they need to clearly have no means to go back to their first location to get their second dose. If you took a trip to LA and were lucky enough to get through a system that maybe wasn't checking as closely, we're going to ask you to please go back to that location for your second dose.

We also are seeing a number of people, I think because of their anxiety about making sure they get an appointment schedule their second dose appointment too soon. And if that happens, we are actually going into our system and clearing out those appointments. We will notify you of the cancellation but please do not make an appointment earlier than that three week or four week interval because we will have to cancel those. So there is some good news on the vaccine front, we continue to get doses this past week we had such a limited supply that we had to consolidate our clinic offering and we did it only at Cuesta College. We closed down for a week our Paso site and our Arroyo Grande site. We will be able to open those up next week. However, again, because of the limited supply and our desire to be as efficient as possible, we wanna get 20 people through with each vaccinator an hour, not five. So we're going to limit to three days next week, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday at all three sites.

So February 16th through the 18th, we will be at Cuesta College, we'll be at the Paso Robles Event Center and we'll be at Arroyo Grande High School. However, those last two, Paso Robles and Arroyo Grande will be only for second doses. We are scheduling about 3,800 doses at those two sites and we have second doses do that exceed 4,000. So, I know that we have gone back and forth on delaying second doses, trying to find that sweet spot of making them available between the four week and the six week interval. If we were to delay those second doses anymore right behind them, next week, we have another 4,000 some odd that are due. So we are going to try to get all of the second doses done in the next couple of weeks.

With that said, however, we will have the availability for new first doses that will take place at Cuesta College. And we will be offering the Pfizer vaccine and only

1900 first dose appointments are available on the basis of the vaccine supply that we have. That said, if people want to check our website, occasionally we have cancellations through the website or phone calls, but preferably the website, you may want to check back from time to time to see if appointments have become available. So with that, the good news that I can announce today related to new first doses is that our vaccine task force met today, we talked through further phase 1b, tier one. I'll remind you what that includes is individuals over the age of 65. It includes the education sector, the food and Ag sector and emergency services. And with the help of our task force, we have made the decision to move forward effective immediately. But in terms of new appointments for us that really means the next week with age 65 and older. We know that there has been a lot of demand from that population. And we believe based on the patterns we've been seeing of uptake of our available appointments that we have largely met the demand for the older age group and now can proceed to this next decade of life, those persons age 65 and above.

You've heard from the state that we are moving toward an age-based framework. There are critical sectors that are also still in tier one of phase 1b. We are going to take these next couple of weeks to further refine and determine how best to allocate additional doses as they come into those sectors, such that right at this time, we're only moving forward with those persons age 65 and above. I want to remind you as to the discrepancy again between the demand and the supply, so at this point, as I said, we have 1900 appointments that will be available to this new population as well as any remaining individuals wanting a dose from the previous sectors, healthcare workers and persons over 75. We have 1900 appointments and 38,000 individuals who make up that 65 to 74 year old age group in our county. So as you can see, we have woefully inadequate supply to meet the demand. We do know that people who will try to make appointments when they open up tomorrow morning, Thursday at 9:00 am, will be frustrated. We do know that the demand will far outstrip the ability to make an appointment. We do have our computer systems, however dialed in so that people will be in a wait room on the website, can keep trying back and just do your best to try to get those appointments.

We anticipate that there will be more appointments week after week in this regard. And just as we had that same experience with 75 plus, the first week was very challenging for many and it got better with each week as both our systems improved and the demand declined. So this is the approach that we're taking for

next week is to open up those what we have available to give 1900 doses. There is also a limited supply in other places in the county, French Hospital continues to do some small numbers of community vaccination and we will be communicating to them that they may also now move to this same sector. And when we get more supply, we will push more out to our community pharmacies as well. With that the large demand and the limited supply, we very much request that our community look inside themselves and think about whether or not you should be first up for this. So by that, I mean, are you living safely alone without medical conditions, a healthy 66 year old who doesn't go out hardly at all or has the means to bring in food and doesn't really interact with anyone else, that might be the perfect person to say, let's wait a week or two and give that next appointment to someone who has severe medical conditions who lives with a disabled child who has, you know, older sicker individuals in the house. So basically this is an honor system. We are asking our community to be a little bit more patient as we continue to roll out the vaccine and think about your individual circumstances and try to leave this limited number of appointments available to those most in need.

Just a couple more items I wanted to touch on. There's an update in the state guidance related to worship services. So last Saturday, the state received word that a Supreme Court ruling had come down at the United States level that California's approach to disallowing indoor worship services for counties in the purple tier was found to be not constitutional, and therefore, the state has changed their guidance. So in the purple or red tier, indoor worship services may be held, but at 25% capacity. So the US Supreme Court did allow for variation within the conduct of these indoor worship services be they religious services, weddings, funerals, there can be an indoor capacity of up to 25% of the facility. However, they also allowed in this ruling that because of the higher risk of transmission of disease that singing and chanting be disallowed as we continue through this process. So we also, with that urge, again especially those who are vulnerable and have not completed their vaccine series that they consider participating either only in outdoor services, if those continue to be available in your particular congregation or to ask of your congregations to make available a streaming or a virtual option so that you can participate and not put yourself at this additional risk.

And finally, an update on our tier status. So when the regional stay-at-home order was lifted a week or so ago, we went back into the purple tier. We remain in the purple tier. As you recall, there are three metrics that are a part of this blueprint for

a safer economy, they are the case rate and test positivity rate for our county as a whole and the test positivity rate for our most vulnerable areas, the 25th lowest percentile of our census tracts. With respect to the case rate, we remain firmly in purple. However, we are making progress. Our adjusted rate this week is down to 19.3, so that is an improvement from last week's 22.6, we have over several weeks now been seeing the case rate come down, but it has to get down below seven per hundred thousand population before that particular metric would land us in the next least-restrictive tier or the red tier. The test positivity rate, however, in our county is quite good, it is 4.5% as I mentioned earlier. And that in fact puts us for that metric in the orange tier. Our health equity metric is also so in the orange tier. So our health equity metric for the census tracts that represent our lowest quartile is 4.8%. So with that, the way the rules of this blueprint work is that the county remains in the tier of which the worst metric is, so we are in purple. However, if you are two better than the met the purple tier. So in this case, we are orange in the two other metrics including our health equity metric, county may proceed to the next least restrictive tier if we retain that status for a minimum of two weeks. So right now we are one week into the possibility of moving to the red tier if our overall county positivity rate and our health equity test positivity rate remain in the orange tier for at least one more week. So that is very good news for our community, it is good news for our businesses, it is good news for our schools. As always, I need to remind the public that any of this can change if we open too fast and too aggressively we stand to get back into a bad situation. So I very much support us moving forward with business opening, very much wanna see our schools back in business and therefore, say congratulations to our community but you please need to continue to do everything that we've been asking consistently so we can stay on this downturn and stay moving forward. And with that, I will open it up for questions.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein, with that latest announcement there, what's the soonest thing we could possibly, next week as we sit here today, next Wednesday, we could theoretically be in the red?

- Yes, the question is how soon could we get into the red tier if our health equity metric and test positivity overall stay as low as they have been in this orange tier, we can conceivably move into the red tier a week from today.

- [Man] When would that kick into effect, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday?

- Oh, you know, I will have to go back and look at that. I'm not sure if it's immediate or three days hence, I've forgotten some of the nuances.

- [Man] One or two days probably won't make a big difference. What was the number of doses so far administered in the County? Did you have that...

- So what I can tell you is in the County Public Health Department, as of last Friday, we had administered over 30,000 doses between first and second doses. No, I'm sorry, I'm doing this from memory. We administered just shy of 25,000 doses. Between first and second doses, about 20% of all the people who have gotten first doses have also gotten their second doses. In the county at large, and this is a new finding that on the state's dashboard because they get data that we don't from, for instance, French Hospital, or California Men's Colony or the CVS program in long-term care, they are showing us county-wide as having administered just over 36,000 doses across the county. So if you look at those numbers, we have well more than 10% of our population have been vaccinated. That's a far cry of where we want to get to for herd immunity 70, 80, more percent, but we are making headway.

- [Man] 36,000 and no known number for who received the second dose then probably--

- Not at the county wide level, I do not have that.

- [Woman] Dr. Borenstein has the county adopt how the state determined how much vaccine in the county receives each week?

- No, we have not been able to get a clear formula for the existing allocation process. The state is moving to a new vendor, blue shield for handling that allocation process to local health departments to healthcare systems, to pharmacies. And we do not yet have any insight what may change by virtue of that being in new hands.

- [Woman] And how has Cal Poly's increased testing impacted the county's adjusted case rate or positivity rate?

- Yeah, our adjustment factor remains, last week, it was the highest, this week, it was perhaps the third highest in the state. We continue and this has been true for a long time to benefit from very high testing rates in our county. Cal Poly is certainly a strong contributor to that but it is not just Cal Poly, we through the County Health Department have a very robust testing system. You hear us talk about the five

different locations that we are in every week and we do additional pop-up testing in special populations. We go out to the field to try to get vulnerable people. We also have a lot of testing in the private sector in urgent care, or other primary care locations.

- [Man] I do have a question for... A local high school coach wanted me to ask this of you. And he says, "If Governor Newsom opens up youth sports, "will the county follow the state guidelines "or be more restrictive?" Also, what is your opinion of the, Let Them Play movement? If you've heard of that to open up or reopen up youth sports?

- I have not heard about that movement. I know there's a lot of interest in moving forward more quickly with youth sports. We have in this county with rare exception. There have been a couple of times where I felt that the risk of transmission in certain settings, I'll give you one example was we asked early on when fitness centers opened up that they not have enclosed classrooms with closed doors. And, you know, and I can think of one or two other examples but for the most part, we have abided by all the state rules and not been more restrictive.

- [Woman] Dr. Borenstein, I've heard from several people that are 75 and up that sometimes it's hard for them to be able to schedule an appointment online or via phone call when it's really busy. You had mentioned that that might've changed a little. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

- Our Phone Assistance Center is telling me that they are able to keep up with the demand. Sometimes people might be on hold for 10 or 15 minutes, but that they're not hearing from people that they're having to hold on the phone for an hour or more to get an appointment. We even as recently as yesterday, we had a handful of appointments left for this week. So, you know, I just encourage people to keep trying. If they cannot do not have the means, either they lack the computer or they lack the computer skills to please call our Phone Assistance Center until you get help. Right, thank you.

- Thank you all again for being here today. Just my usual reminders, our Phone Assistance Center, which Dr. Bernstein just mentioned remains open, seven days a week from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Staff there are available to answer questions from members of the public or to help people that have difficulty with the internet or don't have access to a computer to help make appointments for them at the vaccine clinics. We also continue to update regularly our recorded public health

information line. ReadySLO.org remains your main online source for information about the county's response to COVID-19 and recoverslo.org/vaccines is that best place to look for vaccine information. When it's your turn to get vaccinated, you can also go to recoverslo.org/vaccineappointments. New vaccination appointments for next week will be available as Dr. Bernstein said tomorrow morning at 9:00 am on that website. However, you can check back weekdays to see if new appointments have been made available due to cancellations. And if you've made an appointment and cannot keep it, please cancel that appointment as soon as you can so that it can be made available to somebody else. COVID-19 testing continues to be available at the five locations around the county. Please go to readySLO.org for the most up-to-date information links to make appointments and those locations. You can watch these briefings live on our county's YouTube channel and they are live streamed on KSBY and KEYT websites. They're also rebroadcast on SLO's Public Access, Channel 21 at midnight, 8:00 am and 5:00 pm until the next briefing occurs. And they are also re-posted on our SLO County Public Health Facebook page. Thank you once again for staying informed, be well, and we'll see you here next Wednesday, February 17th at 3:15 pm.