

- Good afternoon my name is Michelle Shoresman, and today is Wednesday, February 24th, 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. We also have San Luis Obispo County Emergency Services Director and County Administrative Officer, Mr. Wade Horton here and available to take your questions. Thank you once again to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb and now County Health Officer Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you, good afternoon. I'm here with a fair bit of good news today. So that's always nice. Our COVID statistics now have us just shy of 20,000 cases since the beginning of this pandemic nearly a year ago, in terms of our first case we're at 19,500 since our first case on March 14th. So hopefully we'll not hit the 20,000 mark in that period of time, because things are indeed slowing.

As you can see, we are seeing a dramatic decrease in the cases that we're having. We do have 7% of our population who have had a confirmed positive COVID test at some point but the majority of those are in the past three months. And with that decrease of new cases also our active caseload is considerably lower. 584 today this is down from an all-time high in mid-January of over 3000 so making much progress. Also, our positivity rate continues to drop. We had a high of 11.1% just last week countywide was 4.3 and now we have a positivity rate countywide at 3.2% so that is good news. Our hospitalizations also continued to stay lower than they had been. We still want to see them driven down much further but we only have 21 people in the hospital today four of whom are in intensive care.

We continue unfortunately though as a lagging indicator to continue to see many new deaths. That's not terribly unexpected because deaths do sometimes come after a long period of illness with this disease. So, we have not yet turned the corner. We've had 11 new deaths unfortunately in just the past week and a new number overall of 221. So, for those 11 families who have this late in the pandemic been impacted our hearts and condolences really do go out to you. And all the families who have lost loved ones during this pandemic, it is a reminder to all of us, we are not done, this pandemic is still here. We might see another wave, if we don't continue to do all the good work that I know this community can do. I see more and more face coverings, social distancing, people knowing how to effectively wash their hands, stay home when you're sick, all of the same preventive measures, even though we have a vaccine, none of those can be let up at this point and we want to

stave off an additional surge in our cases. We do not want to be where we saw ourselves in January. We're keeping an eye on the variants and we hope that we will be able to have our case rates so low that when we find ourselves being exposed to those variants that they won't have a lot of place to go because everyone's doing the right thing.

In addition, obviously one of our most important if not the most important preventive strategy is vaccine and getting as much vaccine as we can out as quickly as we can. So, there's very good news on this front. We've received nearly 40,000 doses. These are first and second doses, and we have administered in the public health department, nearly 27,000 doses so far. countywide, including other providers that have vaccine, we've administered in the county over 54,000 doses at the rate that you see where almost more a third of our doses have been second doses. So more than 30% have been completely vaccinated. If you apply that percentage to the total number of doses administered in the County, we're making good progress. We have almost 15% of our population fully vaccinated and doing more with each passing week.

With that, I am happy to report that this week we are on track to deliver more than 10,000 additional doses this week, first and second doses at our three county vaccine sites. And for the first time we're going to hit our goal at one of our three sites where we will have at least a thousand doses administered every day, this week, Monday through Friday at our Cuesta site in SLO. So, we're making good progress in achieving our vaccination goals. We always want more vaccines so we can get toward that 15,000 doses in a week. And again, that is just the county's offering. We do continue to see more vaccine opportunities in the community. The federal pharmacy partnership is now available at a couple of locations. CVS and Rite Aid have sites where they are offering vaccine and our community health centers are also expected to start receiving direct federal allocation of vaccine. So, as we expand the partnerships that are available to deliver vaccine, and we continue to grow our capacity at the county, we want to continue to get toward that herd immunity.

With that talking about appointments at the county system, we know that this has been challenging for a lot of people. We know our system is not perfect, and we are working very hard to continuously improve our systems. So, toward that end, I know several weeks back had talked about our consideration of moving toward a registration system and a lottery-based system as some other counties had done.

We have resurrected that idea for the following reasons. We know that the demand on our system and the available vaccine are woefully disparate. There's not nearly enough opportunities for people to make appointments among those who want to.

So, we want to address this in a fair and equitable and logistically feasible manner. And so, we had put a pause on this idea of the lottery system, when we were told that the myturn statewide appointment scheduling system was coming imminently, we have since learned that that is probably not as close out as we were originally told. And so, though we did not want to confuse the public with changing the system and then changing it again just a couple of weeks or so later, we believe now that our migration to the state system, my turn is likely to be at least six or eight weeks out possibly. And thus, we feel that we need to do something now locally to deal with improving our appointment system.

So, with that, unfortunately we're not able to roll it out tomorrow. We are gonna have at least this one more week of the same mechanisms of going online at 9:00 AM tomorrow morning, Thursday morning for registering online for an appointment for the following week for the period, March 1st through March 5th. We will have first dose appointments available. Second dose appointments. I'll talk about in a moment have already been available to people starting today, but new first dose appointments will roll out at nine o'clock tomorrow. We asked that most people do it online. We do have some reserved through our phone system at the phone assistance center especially for people who need that additional help who either don't have a computer don't feel comfortable or have language barriers. So, we have both of those mechanisms to make an appointment. We do recognize that their demand is still high and there will still be many, many people who are unable to get an appointment for next week, but we are hopeful to be able to roll out our registration and lottery system in the early part of next week. And certainly, in time for the next week's allocation of appointments.

So, second doses, I said, I would come back to that. We are hearing a lot of anxiety from people who are wondering when and how they will be able to access their second dose. So, for a number of weeks, we talked about how we weren't sure if we were gonna get adequate allocation. We also had some varying thoughts that were coming both from the state as well as our own local considerations. Should we do more first doses and worry about second doses later. We really now have committed we're in a new phase in this we've committed to get people their second doses on time, such that we actually make our allocation for second doses based

on how many are due. And then back into how many first appointments we can make. So, I want to give all the people who are waiting for their second appointment, reassurance that our allocation at this point in time everything with this pandemic is at this point in time but we believe in the coming weeks, our allocation is and will continue to be sufficient to meet the needs of those to get on time, second dose appointments.

So, people don't need to be trying to get that second dose appointment immediately after their first dose. Wait until the time comes that you're either three weeks out from a Pfizer dose or four weeks out from a Moderna dose. And then you can go into the same system where you went the RecoverSLO.org/Vaccine to make your second dose appointment when your time is due. Again, use the phone system if you need that additional support. We will also send you a reminder about your due date. You don't need to necessarily wait until you get that reminder. We're rolling those reminders out on Wednesday the week before it is due so you can go into the system yourself when those appointments are made available in the week before, make your appointment but know that there will be availability for you.

I do wanna talk more about vaccine decision-making and sectors that have been asked to wait at this moment in time. In this county we have continued to make available vaccine to our first phase healthcare workers. Pretty much anyone who wanted a dose in that sector has been taken care of. 75-year-olds were next and now 65-year-olds and older is the group for whom new appointments are available as well as anyone still in those other sectors. We've been hearing from lots of people about the other essential workforce sectors that are in phase one B of the state's recommendation. Specifically again, those are education and childcare. They are emergency services, and they are food and agricultural workers. We have worked very closely with our task force to make cogent decisions about how to start to get to those groups, while we still have a very high unmet demand on the age basis of individuals aged 65 or older.

So, we're doing a couple of things in that regard. First off, the governor has basically issued a mandate to counties, and we will honor that, and it is appropriately so that some portion of the allocation begin to serve the needs of the education sector. So, our childcare providers and our kindergarten through 12th grade school staff teachers, those doing in-person services will have access starting next week to some number of appointments we are honoring the 10% of our allocation will go to that sector. That will not meet the needs of that entire sector. Just as the small

number of doses we have available does not meet the entire need for the age 65 and over but we are going to begin the process of taking care of our education and childcare sector. This is important, especially as schools are looking at the prospect of opening more widely we are going to try to keep step with meeting that need for those on a prioritized basis who are in person and as they move back into higher risk settings more students coming on board, these staff and childcare providers will work with their employers to try to develop a prioritized scheme to try to get as many people through the system as quickly as they can. So, 10% of our doses starting next week will go to this sector.

And we're very grateful to our County Office of Education and our Childcare Planning Council, Dr. Jim Brescia, Raechelle Bowlay are two representatives on our task force. And they are helping us enormously with the logistics of scheduling the people in those sectors. So, we do ask that the people who are workers in the K through 12 sector or childcare that if you have questions about this that you direct them to your employer, as we begin to work through the logistics of beginning to make this available next week.

The task force additionally looked at these other sectors. And so, we are certainly have continuously put a lot of emphasis worked with promotores, worked with our farm worker task force, worked with representatives of the Latin X community and other groups to really try to do outreach and education and support in appointment scheduling for these higher risk groups. We are also now planning to begin to set aside specific times for farmworker groups to get vaccinated but as we are working through the planning of that emphasis it's probably at least two to three weeks out but we do have real plans in place to move forward with that, while we continue to try to urge those individuals who are older in that sector to make an appointment and those who are not yet ready to at least who are not eligible currently but to ready themselves and have enough information and feel confident about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine to take us up on the offer as we move into piloting specific vaccination opportunities with the farm worker sector that we'll have more information forthcoming on that. So, we are planning to move forward in that group, the other group, so that does not cover at this time still the entire food and agriculture sector, which is still quite large, but we do recognize that they are next up in this tiered schema but we're asking for more patients at this moment in time from that group.

The other sector that the task force talked about today and it's a much smaller group, and we believe we'll be able to accommodate them is emergency services. And we will be working with the Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement entities to make available in the coming one to two weeks for those individuals in those sectors who are ready to take a vaccine to be able to do that in a closed pod fashion, point of distribution meaning we will work with a clinic that works directly with our Sheriff's Office to make those doses available. The reason I'm saying law enforcement as opposed to the entire emergency services sector is the fire community by virtue of most of their personnel, also having healthcare worker status EMT or paramedics have largely been taken care of. There are a few other groups in the emergency services sector, and we will wrap them into this plan as well. But it is a much smaller group. When we add together emergency services, the entirety of education and childcare which includes higher education, the entirety of food and agriculture. As a reminder, we're talking about 70,000 people and we didn't want to open the doors far and wide for that many people while we are still working hard to get 65-year-olds and older vaccinated, that group being 38,000.

So, I know that other counties have done this differently. We hear all the time from our constituents. How come my sister who's a teacher in X County has already been able to get it. How about my grocer neighbor who got it in such and such County, we recognize that these are difficult decisions, and we are leaning heavily on representatives of all these sectors to make decisions. I did mention higher education just to circle back to that. We also plan on moving forward in the coming one to two weeks with a proportionate allocation to that sector as we continue to get more doses. So, stay tuned on that.

I do wanna talk about our blueprint status. So, we remain in purple. However, there is good news on this front. I wanna remind folks what it takes for us to get to red. So, the traditional way is that all of the metrics of a county that pertain to case rate, test positivity overall, and test positivity for the health equity quartile that all three of those need to be in red for two weeks in order for the county to move from purple to red. With the case rate, it needs to be below seven per hundred thousand population per day. And our new metric in that regard is at 9.4. So that yesterday, on Tuesdays the state releases the most up-to-date metric on these three findings. 9.4 is where we're at. That is a lot of movement over just recent weeks. Last week, we're at 15.6 and recall that we had a high of 66. So, we are getting close to that seven, where we wanna be to move into red, but we're not quite there.

But the second way that a county can move into red, and we had that couple of weeks ago, was that your test positivity rate in the county, your test positivity rate in your health equity quartile is even better than red. So, orange or better. And once again, for this week we do see ourselves in both of those metrics in the orange tier. To be specific overall our county's positivity rate as of yesterday is 3.2% in our health equity quartile it is 3.8%. So, we are well into orange now. And my hope is unlike the last time that we have made even more progress and that by next week we have the possibility of moving to red. So please stay tuned on that. Please keep up your good work. None of us wanna be disappointed so hopefully we will be able to make that movement. And finally, one more bit of good news pertains to youth sports. This is one other metric. I hope you can keep all these numbers straight, what it takes to open a county in this regard, what it takes to open schools.

In youth sports we have yet a new number, and this is that for a county that is in purple, but their case rate, their daily case rate per 100,000 population is below 14, that county may open for resumption of competitive sports at the youth and adult level. This pertains to schools, recreational leagues, private clubs, et cetera. And we have met that metric now. So, what does this mean specifically? As you recall 9.4 is where we are below 14. So, for all of these settings, competitive sports and recreational sports can resume with all of the modifications that are laid out in the state's guidance. So particularly for the highest risk sports which are football, rugby, and water polo there is one additional and significant requirement which is that all of the participants be tested on a weekly basis for COVID before they can play. And that they have to have the results in hand 24 hours before either a game, a casual game or a competitive game. There are still many requirements for mask wearing, for physical distancing, limits on spectators, limits on how much competition across county boundaries can happen. And we're still not at this point talking about big events with multiple teams. We're also not talking about indoor sports. So, all of this pertains at this time to outdoor sports for a county like ours in purple and one additional requirement for youth is that for all sports, there needs to be informed consent from the parent to participate. So, all of this information is available in much greater detail on our guidance. The state's guidance is available at [ReadySLO.org](https://www.readySLO.org). And with that, I will open it up for questions.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein, you had mentioned the county will go to a lottery-based registration system or appointment system for vaccinations next week, beginning next week?

- So, our plan is to have the system ready to roll out next week. So, it would be four appointments, not next week but the week after.

- [Man] How will that play out just for anyone that may simply will be a lottery, you register your name and X number of people will be there.

- Right so in broad strokes, how we envision a lottery system working for appointments is we will have X number of first appointments available. Whether you register the minute before we actually run the numbers if you will or you've registered three weeks ago, you will be available to be pulled by random electronically to get an appointment. As part of the registration process our intent is to ask individuals about their preferred time and date day of the week and morning, afternoon a little bit like the cable guy system. And so, once someone is selected for an appointment within the number of available slots for a given week, they will be given an appointment. If they can't make that appointment, we will ask them to let us know to make it available to the next person in line.

- [Man] Also, I believe the number four for county residents at 65 or older than that group was at 36,000 roughly, was that the number of...

- 38,000 of 65 plus, yeah.

- [Man] Where's the county right now in terms of you said there's still a high demand.

- Yeah, so for instance, for this week's appointments I think it was 3200 1st dose appointments went in 41 minutes in our online system. So, knowing that we've only gotten two weeks into this and the number of first dose appointments we still have quite a ways to go in meeting the need of that population.

- [Woman] Dr. Borenstein, for the lottery system, if your name is not chosen, you have to register next week as well.

- No, thank you for that. So, the question being, if you register for the lottery system one week and you're not selected you have to continuously register. And the answer is no. You register one time; you will remain in our system until you either withdraw or we get you an appointment.

- [Woman] And Dr. Borenstein, what do you think about Paso Robles School Board's decision last night to ask the district to come up with a plan to reopen secondary schools, even if SLO County remains in the purple.

- So, our approach in the county has been that we try to be as least restrictive as we can to support especially our schools and very much so our businesses. We have been unwilling in the county level to actually not comply with state mandates. Each jurisdiction is their own jurisdiction, and they make their own decisions. My hope for their sake and their resonance sake and for the county as a whole, is that they will be able to comply because we will be in the red tier when they plan to open their schools, thank you.

- Thank you all for being here today once again. A few updates and reminders before we close. Our phone assistance center remains open seven days a week from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. We are experiencing a high call volume at the phone assistance center, especially in the mornings. If you get a busy signal, please hang up and call back later in the day. Staff there are available to answer questions or to help individuals make appointments at the vaccine clinics if they do not have access to the internet 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 for information about the county's response to COVID-19 and RecoverSLO.org/vaccine is the best place to go for information about vaccines including a handy vaccine FAQ page. Next week's new first dose vaccination appointments will become available tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM. As always please cancel your appointment as early as possible if you aren't able to make it. COVID-19 testing continues at five locations around the county, please go to ReadySLO.org for the most up-to-date information on those locations and for links to make appointments. You can watch these briefings live on the County's YouTube channel and they are frequently live streamed on the KSBY and KEYT websites. There are also rebroadcast on SLO County Public Health Facebook page, as well as public access channel 21 at 8:00 AM, 5:00 PM and midnight each day until the next briefing occurs. Thank you once again for staying informed, be well and we will see you here next Wednesday, March 3rd at 3:15 PM.