

- Good afternoon. My name is Michelle Shoresman and today is Wednesday, March 3rd, 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, County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director Wade Horton is also 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 happy to be with you here today. I've nothing but good news for a change. It's been going in a good direction but today we've got quite a few things to talk about in a positive direction. So first of all, it's taking us weeks to get from 19,000 to this new metric of 20,000 so that's good. We're creeping up, but we're still staying below that 20,000 level at 19,751 COVID cases since the beginning. Today we have only 422 active cases, so you can see our case numbers continue to decline both new cases and active cases. People are recovering from this disease in that 10 day timeframe. We are also seeing our positivity rate both at the County level and in our vulnerable areas have come down even further. This week, countywide we're at 2.7%, of all tests are positive for COVID and our hospitalizations have fallen also again to now 16 with five individuals in intensive care.

I've been saying week after week that I'd like to see our death rates start to come down and we are really starting to see progress in that arena though. Unfortunately, we still lost another 11 people just in this past week. Our new total number of deaths attributable to COVID since the beginning of this pandemic is unfortunately 238. We have 11 more individuals for whom we are waiting death certificates that are likely to be confirmed as COVID deaths. Always, I like to make sure that the families who are affected by this know that we know that they are more than numbers. These are real people and our hearts continued to go out to those who have had this worst impact from the COVID disease. With that said, we are making progress on our vaccination efforts.

Our main focus of effort at this point is trying to get vaccine out as quickly as possible. We do use virtually all of our doses within the one week period of time that we get them at a county-wide level. So inclusive of public health as well as other providers that are vaccinating we are just under 70,000 vaccines doses that have been administered to people who are residents of our County, and number exactly is 69,202, last week we administered just under 10,000 doses to be exact

9,764 and this week we are on schedule to go even higher 10,924 appointments this week. Next week, even better news, we gotten an early delivery of next week's doses. We're gonna put them right into use next week. We also got a small donation from one of our provider partners who has completed vaccinating their cohort. So all things considered, we are able to schedule 13,000 appointments next week. That brings us very close to where we've been trying to get 15,000 a week. I do wanna however say there is a caveat that we should not yet believe that this is our new normal. We will get to that higher number next week but we do not have it in our sites to necessarily maintain that level of vaccination. But with the new product coming on board, we certainly hope that we will continue to see increased allocation.

So for public health, we have given through last Friday, we always post just a week at a time through last Friday we have over 46,000 doses administered, 31,737 of those are individual people who have gotten at least a first dose. And with nearly 15,000, having gotten their second dose we are close to half of all people having gotten the two dose series and been fully vaccinated. So that is great news as well. In addition, I mentioned that we have partners in this and they are growing. So we now have two locations that are administering vaccine in larger numbers through their direct federal allocation of doses. That is both CVS and Rite Aid and royal Duane Reade and also this week, our federally qualified health centers or community health centers of the central coast has started to receive vaccine and they are also now able to directly administer to their patient population.

With respect to eligibility, we are pretty much at the same place with some nuances. So for the most part, our vaccines at this point in this County are still going to those who are aged 65 and above, regardless of medical condition, everyone in that category can get a vaccine. Continued efforts to get any healthcare workers who have not previously been immunized to have them also take advantage of the opportunity at this point. And additionally, now where you've started to be able to move into the other essential workforce sectors that are included in the states phase 1B tier 1.

So to remind you that is the education sector, there we are really starting to make some progress with childcare and with grades K through 12, kindergarten through 12. We this week, we started to immunize we have over 660 appointments available for those individuals that represents more than 10% of this week's first doses. Next week, we're gonna continue with at least that 10% allocation. So another

approximately 850 doses next week between the childcare and K through 12 that entire population is about 7,000. Two weeks we're into it, we expect to be about 1500 doses. We know everyone's not gonna take advantage. Some of these people are working at home, don't feel the need to at this point. So we will be making within a very short period of time great progress in that sector. Also, in the education sector we have begun to make available appointments next week for institutes of higher education on a very limited basis.

At this point, we still want to emphasize first and foremost, our age and higher risk sector but we are beginning to open up at least a limited number of appointments for the rest of the education sector. Additionally, the other two sectors emergency services. We are beginning this week to make doses available to start to complete the sector of emergency services. I say it that way because many individuals in that sector, particularly our fire personnel who represent healthcare workers, paramedics and EMTs they have already gotten their doses in phase 1A we're trying to round out the first responder community over just this week and next week to get that cohort done. And then we will continue to look at who's remaining in the emergency services sector and hopefully be able to move that through that group as well in just a short period of time. With respect to the other workforce sector that is included in the phase 1B tier 1 food and agriculture. We do have plans for our first farm worker set aside to happen the week after next, we will be hearing more detail on that soon I'd is taking us a little while longer than we would have liked, but we are working through our farm worker task force through employers, through the community supportive entities like Promotores and other entities that represent the Latin X community. So we are making progress and we are gonna get there very soon.

So who would be next? I know that there are still many people beyond those sectors who are wondering, and what I'd like to say to the public is we at that point, when we've made great headway and see that the demand on the existing age and essential workforce sectors start to retreat, we will begin to open up next first and foremost for those individuals with underlying medical conditions and certain disabilities that put them at higher risk. We don't know it yet. If we'll be able to meet the governor's recommended timeframe of March 15th, but that is very much a group that we want to move forward with as soon as we can. We also want to say that we will continue to prioritize as we have in this County. Our approach has been to not open up entire sectors all at once, but to take cracks at it in deliberative

ways. So while I don't have any specific information yet we are not likely to open up when we get through the 65 group to everybody else. There is no longer a state phase 1B tier 2 there is no phase 1C, but we will continue that work in this County with the advice of our task force with what we hear from the public and we will continue to make doses available on the basis of age, category and risk factors as we move forward. So we indulge the public's patience as we continue to make great headway but please hang in there a little while longer. And as always, as I say that, it means that we all still continued to need to take all the protective measures until we get to that place where we've really driven the case rate way down and have a very high level of immunity in our population, we need to continue on the course.

So how we're making appointments is changing this week, actually yesterday we opened up our lottery registration process. I think there may be some confusion out there, we actually have not seen the demand that we would have expected when we opened the option for anyone aged 65 and above to register their interest with us and to be available to be selected for an appointment through lottery process. So as of couple of hours ago, when I last checked on it we were at about 2300 people who had enrolled in, they registered to be part of this first selection of appointments through a lottery system based on what we understood as yet unvaccinated population to be in aged 65 and above we are expecting that number to be much higher. I believe that many people in the population got used to our Thursday morning appointment opening and perhaps we're waiting for that period of time.

Right now, people can and should go into RecoverSLO.org/vaccines and fill out a registration form to be selected for an appointment next week. As part of the registration, people can make known day of week, that's a preference and morning versus afternoon preference and if they are selected to get an appointment they will be provided a confirmatory email that we have made an appointment for them. The date and the time will be provided and there's no additional need to confirm, unless of course you need to change it then we very much ask that you let us know. For those who are not selected they will also get a message that says reminds them. You only need to register one time, if you're not selected for next week's appointments you will be eligible to be selected for the following week. So even though I mentioned that we only have 2300 registrants now nearly 8500 first dose appointments for that group next week I feel pretty confident that with this

messaging and your help that we will get to at least, and maybe double or triple the number of people continuing to be interested in appointments for next week.

We will make that selection as promised tomorrow but people can continue to register at any point. So you can do it at 10:00 pm tonight. You can do it at 10:00 am tomorrow. You can do it over the weekend. The sooner, the better for your chances to be in our our initial selection tomorrow morning. If for some reason we do not have a enough registrants and we complete whoever has registered to date, we will select again until we fill our roughly 8,500 appointments next week. So that's, what's going on with our registry process at present, we do ask that only people age 65 or older or healthcare workers do that registration process, folks in the education sector because we have this set aside allocation, and we're working with partners to schedule those appointments. We ask that those individuals do not use this lottery process. We also ask that people who need their second dose do not use this lottery process. You can go in right now, if you're time has passed three weeks for Pfizer, four weeks for Moderna to go into the system right now and make your second dose appointment we do also notify people, their text or email when that second appointment is due. So, welcoming everyone aged 65 and above healthcare workers who have not yet gotten a vaccine to register through this process online. You also, if you do not have access to a computer or have challenges in using the online system you can call our phone assistance center at 543-2444 and get assistance with registering to be part of the lottery.

And finally other good news. I'm here to say that today we are officially in the red tier. It has been more than three months and this was a long haul, especially my hearts go out to our business community, schools, families, parents everyone who has been waiting for this moment for us to begin to take the next steps back toward normalcy. I say, begin to take the next steps. We still absolutely need to take care to do all of the protective measures of wearing masks and distancing and staying home when you're sick and good hand hygiene and avoiding travel and avoiding large gatherings, et cetera. But we are, as you heard at the outset seeing a great decrease in our case count we wanna keep it that way. We wanna move further into the orange tier and beyond and be able to do more but effective today with all the mitigation measures and capacity limits in place. There is now a lot more that folks in our community can take advantage of, and our businesses can begin to get back on their feet for those that have been struggling with closures.

So just to give you some of the list of things that applies in the red tier, restaurants now can be in place indoors at a 25% capacity, museums at 25% movie theaters, zoos, worship services, indoors can increase the number of participants. Fitness centers and gyms is still at that lower level of 10% but now maybe open indoors and for many of us, very good news that all schools all levels, all grades of schools, in five days, time at the upper grades can be open for in-person instruction of middle school and high school. Our elementary schools have had that option now for a couple of weeks, but now this is extended to our upper grades as well. Still, there are some restrictions in the red tier, so card rooms, family entertainment centers, wineries and tasting rooms and offices for non-essential services are still restricted at this time, but we are making quite a bit of progress. So I wanna thank the community for that, I want everyone to continue to stay engaged get your vaccine when your opportunity comes up and help us collectively move forward so that we can get back to a time that we remember and we will have again in the not too distant future. With that, I'm open for questions.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein, I know we've been in the red tier for all of the like 15 hours or so but it's never too soon to look ahead. What will the County do to make another further step into the orange tier especially since we know two metrics are already in that.

- Right and actually just and so all three of our metrics right today are in the red, put us in the red tier. So I'll just remind you about the whole schema being less than seven cases per hundred thousand population per day on the case rate, puts us in red. and we are there today at 6.8 for the entirety of the last week, By virtue of the other the test positivity at the County level being in the orange tier, as well as the health equity quartile being the orange tier for two weeks in a row that has allowed us to move now into red and not wait for the case rate to have two weeks of that better metric. What it will take for us to make the next step forward into orange is we will be in the red tier for a minimum of three weeks. But at any point, if we have two weeks worth of metrics that are more positive, so either our case rate and our test positivity rates being in orange, we'll be able to move to orange. Similarly, what that number is just to give you a sense of it is below four per hundred thousand so that's roughly no more than 10 cases per day on average, we've been there before. In terms of the test positivity rate we need to be below 2% test positive both for countywide and again for the health equity metric.

- [Man] Another question for you. We asked the governor yesterday, I'll ask you, so now there's more indoor operations any concerns that could bring about another increase in some spread, particularly with some of the variants and all that. I know there's some health experts nationally that are saying be cautious.

- Yeah and thank you for reminding me about the wonderful visit we had yesterday with the governor, for those of you who didn't get the chance to see, he came to visit one of our very successful vaccination pods, just up the road at Cuesta college, that is the place we've been doing more than a thousand vaccinations. We're in a bit of a race against time with the variants and the vaccination. We want to get our case rates way down, we want to get everybody vaccinated before these mutated viruses have a chance to take hold. So, really good news at the federal level that the vaccine supply looks like it's gonna come through quicker. We really need to do everything we can as we have been doing to get as much vaccination into our County and into people's arms as quickly as possible and we need to continue to take all the protective measures, so we don't see our case rates go up. It is when you have a lot of virus circulating that the opportunity exists for the virus to change its genetic structure and for it to then change how easily it can be transmitted, what impacts that has on people and whether or not the vaccine is effective right now all of those things are under reasonable control but we very much need to keep our eyes on it. I'm cautiously optimistic that we will outrun the variants if you will but it is very much why I keep telling the public we are not out of the woods. So please hang in there for another several months before we get to herd immunity and we can really put this in our rear view mirror.

- [Woman] can you talk about that a little bit with yesterday President Biden say we would have enough vaccine for everyone by the end of May. What does that mean for us here in SLO County? Will everyone be able to get a shot by the end of May? Can you explain that little bit?

- I heard the news as you did, I don't have the numbers per say but I understood the commitment to be that unless something goes awry between the three products that are now on the market the Pfizer, the Moderna and the Johnson and Johnson vaccine that we will get our fair share and be able to immunize every adult in this County who wants a vaccine, at least a first dose. So for those two products that need a second dose, we may not have that completed by the end of May but that we will at least be able to give a first dose to every adult who wants it, and I

think that that includes every adult and by adult it's at this moment in time, age 16 and above is the , one of the products is licensed for that age group down to 16.

- [Woman] Can you also talk a little bit about the significant drop in cases we saw last month? Can you speculate what contributed to that? Do you feel like this is a turning point? Do you see any bumps in the road ahead as we move forward?

- Well, there is always an opportunity for us to get back into a surge. And it's why I keep saying the same things repeatedly about until we really tame down this virus once and for all we need to continue to do all the protective measures as to why it came down. I mean, to some extent, there's natural curves, we had the holidays, we had a lot of indoor activity, we had a lot of gatherings travel, et cetera. I think we passed those moments and we need to not repeat that with any of the upcoming weeks and months.

- [Woman] Can you also talk a little bit, you kind of mentioned this but in terms of like what's coming next with the vaccine there seems to be a lot of confusion over the state had a certain system and then they kind of seem to scrap the system and then we have the ages. Can you explain that a little bit?

- So I mean, they're at each level of government there are entities that are using science to make decisions about who should go next in terms of vaccination, at the federal level it's the advisory committee on immunization practices at the state level, there is both a scientific task force as well as a community advisory vaccine group and as you know, in our County we have a vaccine task force. All of them are looking at the same information and making largely the same kinds of decisions. We have felt that we have the responsibility and the opportunity to subdivide if you will a little bit further 'cause we have the means within our community to really finely tune our appointment process. I know that we intend or expected to move to a statewide system. We are still unclear at this moment in time when that will happen and if we will, at that point still be able to have our more refined eligibility process and those that will be clearer to us in the weeks to come. Thank you.

- Thank you all for being here today. Just a few little reminders, then updates ReadySLO.org remains your main online source of information for all the counties information on our COVID-19 pandemic response and RecoverSLO.org/vaccine is the best place to go for information about vaccine including our handy vaccine FAQ page. Our phone assistance center remains open seven days a week from 8:00 am until 5:00 pm. And our recorded public health information line remains available 24

hours a day, seven days a week. Our first dose vaccine registration system became available yesterday online at RecoverSLO.org/vaccine. If you are currently eligible for vaccine please go there and sign up if you would like an opportunity to be vaccinated as early as next week. As Dr. Borenstein mentioned, you will not need to check back once you've registered. You only need to register once and you'll receive updates after that. If you do not have access to a computer or the internet the phone assistance center staff are happy to help you with that sign up. Testing continues to be an important tool for helping us contain this disease. We continue to offer free COVID-19 testing in five locations around the County. If you think you may have been exposed or feel symptoms please go to ReadySLO.org for locations and links to make testing appointments. These sites are also now accepting walk-in appointments and test results are frequently back within less than 48 hours. Visit our EmergencySLO.org/testing for more details. You can watch these briefings live on our county's YouTube channel and there are frequently live-streamed on KSBY and KEYT websites. They are also rebroadcast on SLO County's Public Health Facebook page as well as cable access channel 21 at midnight, 8:00 am and 5:00 pm until the next briefing occurs. Thank you once again for staying informed, be well and we will see you here next Wednesday March 10th at 3:15 pm.