

Michelle Shoresman:

Good afternoon. Today is Wednesday, April 8th, 2020, and you are watching the daily media briefing for the San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 emergency response. My name is Michelle Shoresman, and I'm the designated media contact for our public information team. Thank you to all the members of the media and those in the public for tuning in today at home.

Michelle Shoresman:

This afternoon we have three speakers for you. We will begin with emergency services director and county administrative officer Wade Horton. He will be followed by Melissa James, CEO of REACH. That's Melissa James, M-E-L-I-S-S-A J-A-M-E-S. Following Ms. James we'll have the county health officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. After all their statements are complete the speakers will be available for questions, and just my usual reminder: Please speakers, remember to repeat your question before answering. Thank you again to Robin Babb, our American Sign Language interpreter and now San Luis Obispo County Emergency Services Director and County Administrative Officer Wade Horton.

Wade Horton:

Thank you, Michelle. Wade Horton, County CAO and Emergency Services Director.

Wade Horton:

First, I'm pleased to announce that we had a soft opening for Cal Poly alternatives care site today, and we began orientation for our medical volunteers. Phase one is complete with 165 beds, and the plan allows phase expansion to accommodate more than 900 patients if needed. This site is something our entire community can be proud of. While the county emergency operations center is primarily focused on immediate emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis, we recognize the severe economic hardships across communities and households here on the Central Coast. That is why the county has formalized a public-private partnership with REACH to implement immediate economic relief and future recovery actions. For those of you who don't know REACH, the new name for the Hourglass Project, it's a coalition of public, private, and civic leaders from SLO and Santa Barbara Counties working to create a stronger regional economy.

Wade Horton:

These won't be government-led efforts. Rather, it will be led by the business community in partnership with local governments and other employers in the region. Together we are united leaders from both San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties, cities, chambers, and community partners to support our businesses, families, and residents now. We've started by centralizing the information resources and communications on a new website called recovercentralcoast.org, which currently focuses on economic relief and will focus on our future economic recovery. This resource is the first step of many. As the impacts and needs in our community rapidly unfold, so will our region's response. Together our resilient Central Coast community will overcome the challenges that we are facing.

Wade Horton:

Now I'm going to invite up Melissa James, CEO of REACH, to talk about plans for economic relief.

Melissa James:

Good afternoon. Melissa James, the CEO of REACH.

Melissa James:

As Wade noted, I'm here today as an economic relief and recovery partner with SLO County. REACH is an economic action coalition serving SLO County and Northern Santa Barbara County. We are a private-sector-led organization that works in partnership with government and education to solve regional challenges and create economic prosperity. With the sweeping impacts of COVID-19, we are focusing our attention on uniting the region with one voice and one coordinated response that will allow business, government, healthcare, and nonprofit sectors in our region to work collectively to meet emerging needs across our communities. In partnership with the County of SLO, we are joining forces with community leaders at our local cities, businesses, tourism, and economic development organizations in the region to support our businesses and residents through the economic hardships and ensure we are in the best position possible for a safe and responsible economic recovery.

Melissa James:

Each of these organizations are in close communication with employers and workforce in their communities, and coordination ensures we understand and can address the economic hardships and challenges facing the lives and livelihood of the people of the Central Coast. Together we are launching reachcentralcoast.org, which is the first of many actions this coalition will take to support businesses and individuals in our communities. This site will bring all the resources from various organizations into one place, including economic relief and stimulus funding opportunities, cash aid opportunities for employment, guidelines for essential businesses, local job opportunities, specific resources for nonprofit organizations, and much more. With new developments every day, our coalition will be working together to continuously monitor, evaluate, and streamline resources to make them available in one place. All of us that are a part of this coalition are deeply invested in our community's health and recovery, and we will be working hard to support our communities, families, and businesses, and individuals through the crisis and in the recovery ahead.

Melissa James:

At this time, I'd like to bring up Dr. Penny Borenstein for the remainder of the conference.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Thank you, Melissa. Thanks. I'm Dr. Penny Borenstein, the county health officer, so I'm going to give you our daily statistics today. We passed a milestone of sorts. We are now over a hundred cases with 102. The good news is we continue to tick up slowly and not rapidly or exponentially, so that is good news. We now only have three individuals in the hospital. All of them, however, in intensive care, but all of them stable.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

I did want to spend most of my time clarifying from our last media briefing on Wednesday when I put out a call to both providers and our community to get tested, and I want to provide some clarification on that score.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

It is true that we think that part of the contribution to our small uptick in numbers may well be that we're not doing as much testing as we would like to. So I've basically told individuals that we are no longer sticking to the tough criteria of you must have fever of a certain level plus cough plus some other

symptoms because COVID is actually presenting in a variety of ways, but those are the dominant features still. But even absent some of those symptoms, if you have a picture of a respiratory illness, be it sore throat with cough or fatigue and body aches and chills and even absent the fever, we are very much recommending that people with what looks like a respiratory illness with or without gastrointestinal symptoms be tested. We are asking that the public who need to get that test first and foremost check with their primary care provider, be that a clinic like community health centers or their private physician. We know that not all doctors are testing, so the second line of testing we've recommended is to go to an urgent care site. Many urgent care centers in our community are in fact testing, and we have that information about who is on readyslo.org.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

I additionally recommended to the public that if they are having trouble getting a test through those mechanisms that they can call the public health department. Many hundreds of people did just that and so I want to take this opportunity to clarify that what I was looking for is to stay in touch with what's going on in the community vis-a-vis testing, but not that every person who calls us can get a test through the public health department. So the public health department is still offering testing but to our highest-risk patients, those at hospitals, those who are the healthcare workers, other first responders and essential service workers on the front lines, long-term care facilities, congregate settings at the jail.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Our public health lab has limited capacity and so unfortunately we cannot ourselves open up our testing to the entire general population, but we nonetheless still would like to know if my message of please, if you have symptoms, even if they are not the classic symptoms, to get a test so that we can understand what's going on in our community with this disease. If you are unable to, please call the public health department at (805) 781-5500 and we will work to try to assist you in finding a place to get that test, and we will communicate with the providers who have told us that they are testing to see if in fact that information is still correct.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

The other thing I wanted to do at the same time is to reach out to our medical community, our health care partners, as well as the general public vis-a-vis having sufficient staffing for our alternate care site. So we have had a tremendous response from the community from all walks of life, from physicians and nurses and therapists and medical assistants and technicians, but we need more. If we are going to be able to make the full capacity of our alternative care site available to the community and potentially some of our neighboring partners, we want to be ready for that. So I am again putting out a call to all persons who feel that they can volunteer, especially those in health care, but we also need people who can help with administration, who can help with signing in patients, sign language, anything, basically. If we can use your services, please sign up at readyslo.org and make yourselves known to us as an available volunteer.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Lastly, I want to address the issue of when are we going to peak or have we peaked and the epi curve. I did show about a week ago, I think, what our understanding is of where we are in this epidemic, and I would say that we in SLO County are not necessarily in the same place as every other part of the State of California. I know that yesterday the governor indicated, or his Department of Health and Human Services secretary, Dr. Ghaly, said based on our modeling today, which can change day to day, week to

week, they are looking statewide at a peak of this epidemic in our state at around late May, possibly even early June. I know that our counterparts to the south in Santa Barbara County said perhaps it may be as late as toward the end of this year.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Our own modeling in SLO County is we're probably there sooner rather than later. I know that's not very helpful information, but our numbers are small and we don't have a very robust way to give you a date of when we're going to be at our peak and when we are going to be able to change the circumstances as we face them today. But we are continuing to look at our numbers on a regular basis. We anticipate that we will see a surge beyond that, which we have today. We are prepared for that surge. Both our hospitals are ready and we have the capacity to treat people outside of the hospital through our alternate care site, but I am really hard pressed as much as I would like to give the community that answer of what day, what week, even potentially what month, do we expect to see the turn in our tide of this pandemic.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

So with that I'm going to turn it over for questions, and all of us are available.

Speaker 2:

Dr. Borenstein. So yeah, I wanted to ask you about that November projection. It's just a matter that the models here in this county are indicating hopefully sooner than that date, because that was quite an announcement by one of the officials down there.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Right. So the question was given that Santa Barbara indicated that perhaps the peak there might be as late as November of this year, might we expect it to be quite different here sooner rather than later? And all I can say to that is there are a number of different models out there and again the fact that we have very small numbers, we are tending to sort of put ourselves in alignment with the state who have much more robust numbers. I don't think the situation on the ground for us is tremendously different than what we're seeing in other parts of the state, but in fact other parts of the state are seeing way worse situations and some are seeing better situations. And so though we are modeling and we're looking toward May as our peak, we really don't have a good handle on that. In fact, the more our mitigation measures and social distancing take hold, the further out we can potentially push when we see our peak or maybe we don't even peak. Maybe we're just sort of ticking along.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

We will be coming back to the public in the form of Mr. Horton and the emergency services director and our entire team are having these conversations on a daily basis. We're looking at numbers, we're looking at our search capacity, we look every single day at what our hospital bed numbers are, what our ventilation count is, and we feel very well within the range of handling the epidemic in our county. As to when we begin to lighten up on the situation that we have going on right now, we're not really in a place that we can address that head on right at this moment.

Speaker 2:

About 20 cases confirmed in the last week or so. I mean, how encouraging is that? I know a lot of people are looking for positive news. It's very soon, I know, but I mean in the grand scheme of things that would seem to be something that is very positive.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Right. So the question is with only 20 cases in the past week, do you consider that positive news and what can you say about that? Absolutely that we are seeing a flattening of our curve and that is absolutely good news, and it is kudos to our entire community for doing everything that we've asked of them. We continue to get complaints and we know that there are pockets of persons or areas of communities or little playgroups, I don't mean little playgroups, but teenagers we heard about. We know that not everyone is doing exactly what we've asked of them, but as a community at large and as a county we have been doing a fabulous job and we believe that we're seeing that in the results of seeing small numbers of new cases.

Speaker 4:

Could the county share more specifics on the models, like what's the best projection, what's the worst projection?

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

So the question is can the county share our models? And we want to be very transparent in this. We come to you on a regular basis. We open ourselves up to all manner of media questions, public questions. We have been reluctant to publish our modeling, and the reason for that is not because we're withholding any information from the public, it's just that the models themselves are very subject to change, are somewhat unreliable, and we don't want people to hang their hat on a very specific thing that we might share one day that is subject to change. I guess that's the way I would answer that question.

Speaker 4:

For the upcoming holiday, how would you like to address the community members that are trying to get out but maybe not inundate the beaches and the trails for the weekend?

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

Yeah. The question was what kind of recommendations do we have for the community who maybe especially over the holiday weekend want to get out.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

So I would answer that in a couple of ways. We've all along said to our public, "We want you to get out of the house. We want you to get fresh air. We want you to get exercise. We want you while doing that to comply with the intent of physical distancing." So keep your distance even if you're out for a run. I did this myself the other day. I went for a run with my friend and we stayed on opposite sides of the street or we absolutely kept our distance, and the same is true. I've talked about tennis or golf or whatever kinds of individualized sports that people can do, running, hiking. Make sure that you're not gathering in groups, make sure you're not touching each other, but still the message is we don't want people to necessarily, especially young healthy people, to be locked up in their houses during this.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

I do want to say, however, with the holidays coming, Passover starts tonight, Easter on Sunday, we want to ensure that our religious communities have mechanisms for celebrating their holidays but to continue to do so within the fabric of physical distancing, and I think we'll have more coming on that later this week.

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:24:02] thinking of closing beaches and more trails, that's helped [inaudible 00:24:08].

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

I'm going to pass that over to Wade.

Wade Horton:

Wade Horton, County CAO.

Wade Horton:

So again, we're looking for partnership with the community for compliance with physical distancing. One instance is [inaudible 00:24:24] State Park that talked about there wasn't physical distancing happening at the state park. We put up signs, we request, we actually had our rangers asking folks, "Hey, you need to have some distancing." We weren't getting compliance so we had to close the state park. We are putting measures in place considering that we're going to have some nice weather this weekend and it is Easter weekend, so at Santa Margarita Lake and Lopez Lake, we are going to cap the number of vehicles that we allow into those recreational areas so folks can enjoy it, but they're spread out and we're not concentrating individuals in the parking lots and we're not concentrating individuals at these locations so we can maintain that physical distancing.

Wade Horton:

I think it's important as Dr. Borenstein said, we are flattening the curve. What we're doing is working, so we need to stay the course. Our strategy up to this point has been to slow the spread of this disease. We can't prevent the complete spread of this disease. Our goal has been to slow the spread of this disease so we can build capacity in our healthcare system. We don't want to overwhelm our healthcare system. Getting the ACS, the Cal Poly alternative care site, getting that up to speed, opening that today, that's helping us with having a more robust healthcare system so we can care for people when we need to care for them.

Wade Horton:

We're in constant communication again with our counterparts throughout the state where we're in communication. Dr Borenstein is in communication with the CDC and the governor's office, and we realize and understand that the community wants to get back to normal life as soon as possible. So do we, but we have to do and take the measures that we're doing now and do the hard work now so we can get back to normal as soon as we can, and that means everybody needs to continue to do their part and I'm certainly appreciative of those that continue to do so.

Speaker 6:

I have a question for Melissa. I'm sure there's a lot of business owners out there. Obviously there's a lot of businesses in the county. What would you like to say to them that are very concerned about the status of their business, and what would be, I mean other than the website [inaudible 00:26:45], what's the first step [inaudible 00:26:47] steps that a business owner can do right now to get [inaudible 00:26:50] recovery?

Melissa James:

Yeah, so the question was for the business community. What are the first steps that they can take to begin the road to recovery?

Melissa James:

And I would just answer that I believe many of them are trying to reach out and access the resources that have been provided through the federal stimulus package to help them, whether through this hunkering down economic crisis. The website that's been put up is aggregating all of those different types of resources. The coalition that's come behind this website is much more robust than just providing the resources, but it includes chambers of commerce, the small business development center, and these types of organizations are really coming together to try to help businesses come alongside them in this process.

Melissa James:

For some, it can feel really overwhelming and very bureaucratic, and you don't know how to go through this process. And there are partner organizations, experts within accounting and legal and HR that are volunteering their time to support those types of businesses. So I would say for those businesses out there that are needing that type of support and access, I would go to recovercentralcoast.org. There's contact information there and we will follow up and connect you with exactly what you need, whether it be the resources or just the expertise to come alongside you in the process.

Speaker 7:

I had two quick questions for Dr. Borenstein. Has the county been able to continue to fulfill requests for resources from medical providers?

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

The question was has the county been able to fulfill requests from medical providers for resources? And I'm guessing in particular PPE, personal protective equipment, is what we are primarily sharing, though we also have been able to share some lab resources.

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

In general, the answer is yes, though we have not been able to fulfill all requests. We still have a bit of a prioritization scheme. So I'm not sure I want to single out a particular practice, but some, I can say this because I have a sister who is an optometrist, they may not get the first resource of PPE if the hospital is waiting in line or our first responders, but we have been able to meet some of all of the requests and eventually we'd like to get to the point of meeting all requests.

Speaker 7:

And then are there any medical facilities, businesses, or other facilities with multiple cases? Has there been like an outbreak in any [inaudible 00:29:22]?

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

So the question, I'll rephrase it for you. Has there been any cluster of diseases in a particular facility?

Dr. Penny Borenstein:

We have not. So the ones that we are most concerned about, we keep our eye on our long-term care facilities, our skilled nursing facilities, assisted living, other congregate living situations, especially the jail, ASH, CMC, and we have not had any, knock on wood, we haven't had any cases and certainly not any outbreaks.

Speaker 7:

Okay. Thank you.

Michelle Shoresman:

Thank you again all for coming today and for tuning in at home. Just a few new reminders today. We have two websites to share with you today. As you are aware, we've still got readyslo.org. That remains your go-to site for all SLO-County-specific COVID-19 information. Guidance documents, media releases, and the virtual local assistance center are all located on readyslo.org, and then newly added today we've got the recovercentralcoast.org website which is a new site coordinated by the county and REACH and a number of other partners as Ms. James mentioned that focuses on current economic relief resources for people across the Central Coast.

Michelle Shoresman:

Finally, again a reminder that we still have our public health information line and our phone assistance center available seven days a week, and we are still recruiting members for our medical reserve corps. Please sign up and look for that information at readyslo.org.

Michelle Shoresman:

Thank you again for tuning in today. Our next regularly scheduled briefing will be Friday at 3:15. Please remember to tune in online at our county's website, the SLO County Public Health Facebook page, or at KCOY or KSBY.

Michelle Shoresman:

Thank you again. Be well, and we will see you on Friday.