

- Good afternoon. Today is Wednesday, May 13th, 2020. My name is Michelle Shoresman. Thank you for watching today's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon we have three speakers for you. We will begin today with San Luis Obispo County Behavioral Health Director, Anne Robin. She will be followed by President and CEO of Visit SLO Cal, Chuck Davison. And then we'll close today with County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. We also have County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director Wade Horton here available to take your questions. Thank you to our American Sign Language interpreter, Robin Babb, and now San Luis Obispo County Behavior Health Director, Anne Robin.

- Good afternoon, and thank you very much for being here, I appreciate it. As Michelle said, I'm the Behavioral Health Director, I'm a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, and my role today is to encourage people to take care of yourselves, and take care of your mental health. Now during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's even more important for you to take care of your mental wellness, your mental health. As physical distancing and the shelter-at-home order continues, people are struggling to maintain good mental health. And as Dr. Borenstein mentioned on Monday, May is Mental Health Month. We are wearing our green ribbons again to signify May as Mental Health Month, and we encourage people to be aware of that. We usually hold a large community event every May to educate the community, provide resources, and enjoy various exercises and booths, and opportunities for people to learn about mental health resources, and share their stories of recovery and resiliency. Obviously we're unable to do that this year. So we do have a couple of events set up. We will have Mental Health Awareness Drive Throughs on several Fridays this month, and those are listed on our website, and we'll talk about that a little bit more later. I want to let you know that over 40 million adults suffered from anxiety disorder in America, even prior to this pandemic. About one in five Americans suffer from mental illness. This is not something that is unique to the pandemic, but the pandemic is exacerbating some of the problems. Our counterparts at Adult Protective Services are starting to see an uptick in calls for service, and a slight uptick in reports relating to domestic violence. Now we know that many of you at home are feeling anxious, depressed, confused, and possibly angry. This isn't unusual, and there is help available. While you may feel alone at times, you are not alone. I encourage you to reach out for help. We also anticipate that our frontline workers will have long-term impacts. Medical, law enforcement, and other first responders are all facing an ongoing situation that is extremely stressful. It's important to practice self-care, eat well, rest as much as possible, and reach out to friends and loved ones. You can't take care of others without taking care of yourself. We also know that this can be a stressful time for kids, where they may feel isolated from their friends and family members who don't live in their households. We want to encourage parents who may be stressed out to reach out for help, and to normalize that all children are struggling right now. And everyone needs a little extra support and patience. I'm promoting self-care, and awareness of how adults can model good stress management techniques for their kids. Again, help is available, and you do not have to struggle alone. Now I've been hearing rumors that there's an increased need for mental health services. The data we have locally from our SLO Hotline, and other sources, don't really bear out that data. So, we have some information. On March 20th, the day after the shelter in home order went into effect, the hotline received twice as many calls as the day before. But since then, the number of calls have gone down significantly. I hope that means people are reaching out to their own resources for help. But, if you are struggling and have not reached out, or are embarrassed to reach out, please know that services are

confidential, and they are available. This is the time to set old fears about mental health and mental health treatment aside. Please, if you, or a family member, or a loved one are feeling distressed, call the SLO Hotline at 1-800-783-0607 for help. We've also heard that some areas have seen an increased suicide rate. While we in SLO County have had a relatively high suicide rate compared to other California Counties over the past decade, we are a strong and resilient community. If somebody is thinking about suicide, please don't be afraid to talk about it. If your loved one is thinking about suicide, don't be afraid to ask them, or talk about it. Help them to get connected to the resources in our community. You can do that in several ways. One is by visiting readyslow.org, where you can find health and wellness resources including mental health resources. For immediate help, please call the SLO Hotline at 1-800-738-0607. The hotline can also refer you to therapists who are available to speak with you free of charge. This is part of our county volunteer corps, licensed therapists who are available to talk with you over the phone, or do telehealth with you if you have no insurance, but you need somebody to help you out, please call. Finally, I'd like to invite you to participate in our Mental Health Resource drive through events this month. They will be posted on our website at SLOBehavioralHealth.org, along with other resources and helpful information. Lastly, please call our County Behavioral Health Office for help at 1-800-838-1381. We can tell you if we can serve you through our county services, or we can help you get connected to other therapy resources in the community. Thank you, stay well, be healthy, and take care of yourselves. I'm now gonna pass this over to Mr. Davidson, I apologize.

- Well thank you, and good afternoon. I'm Chuck Davison, I'm the President and CEO of Visit SLO Cal. Visit SLO Cal is the non-profit organization responsible for promoting San Luis Obispo County as an attractive travel destination, while enhancing our public image as a great place to live and work. Through the impact of travel, we strengthen the community's economic position, and provide opportunity for people across the region. And resident quality of life is really one of the key lenses that we view and manage the destination through. And it's important to note that our lodging investors and our hospitality partners are also residents here in San Luis Obispo County. With that said, we hear you. Our leaders here at the county hear you, and our leaders in the local tourism hear you. We know that there are public health concerns right now around tourism. Today I'm here to address how local tourism has been impacted by COVID-19, how our lodging partners are adapting to keep us and their employees safe, and why tourism matters. And Dr. Borenstein will also talk about the public health concerns surrounding tourism in just a few moments. First, the SLO County lodging industry including hotels, should currently be closed for leisure travel. However, lodging businesses were identified as essential from the start of the shelter-at-home, both in the county and at the state level. And under the current statewide stay-at-home order, 90% of our 200 local hotels have remained open over the past eight weeks, providing accommodations for essential workers, housing solutions including measures to protect the homeless population. I want to share with you some ways how tourism has been impacted. On this first graph you see the county wide direct travel spending. In 2019 travel spending reached two billion dollars for the very first time in our county, an amazing accomplishment, up from 1.3 billion in 2010. But based on the impacts of COVID-19, it is suggested that our county will lose an estimated one billion dollars in 2020. The second graph outlines the county wide lodging occupancy, and in March 2019 through May 2019, you see that the occupancy levels reached 64.2%, 74%, and 66.8% respectively. As opposed to that in 2020 you now see how significant the decreases are, dipping to 34.4%, 15.8% in April, and an estimated 21.5% in May. Those decreases are combined for an average between 47 and 79%

across those months, and that is projected to continue into the months ahead. So how is our local lodging industry adapting and working to keep us safe? Well first, Visit SLO Cal, and all of our community destination marketing and management organizations have stopped advertising, back in the month of March. And our only messaging right now is around enjoying the destination virtually, and dreaming of what it will be like when you return. 80% of our lodging properties in the county are independently owned, and again, these are our neighbors, and they have the same concern for our communities and our quality of life and safety that all of you have. As noted earlier, hotel occupancy remains low, but I should point out that there has not been one reported case of COVID-19 coming from any lodging establishment in our county since the outbreak occurred. Local lodging owners are taking great care to keep both travelers and their staff safe. And these lodging properties and the travel and tourism businesses in our county employ local residents to staff their businesses. In fact, in 2019 the travel and tourism industry put close to 23,000 people to work in our county every single day. Making up 12.1% of the county wide workforce. Unfortunately, as you know, a large portion of those individuals are currently unemployed. So why does tourism matter? Well we know that there are public health concerns right now, and it's important long term to understand that local communities get between 10 and 60% of their general public funds from TOT, or Transient Occupancy Tax. In 2019 those numbers totaled 90 million dollars across our county, and those go to help pay for our local essential services like police, fire, and road repairs. And as tourism decreases, there will be less of those funds available. The 280,000 residents across our county, could not they themselves keep all of the restaurants, retailers, tasting rooms, and other local businesses open and thriving. These businesses are and remain heavily dependent on the 7.5 million people that visit our communities annually. So as we ease back into opening businesses safely, we hope that our local residents will support the tourism and hospitality industry as much as they possibly can by eating out, enjoying staycations, and visiting our local establishments. Please remember the tourism industry and the travelers that visit this incredible destination are not our enemy. I myself was a visitor beginning in 2006 before relocating here with my family in 2012. And at Visit SLO Cal we say it all starts with a visit. Individuals won't choose to open a business here, create new jobs, or invest in our community if they've never visited the destination before. People working in the tourism industry are your friends, and they are your neighbors. And they, like you, care about this county. And they want to return to work, but they want to do it in ways that is safe for everyone. We welcome tourists and travelers back when the time is right to reinvest in our communities. SLO County is proud to be their home away from home for many. But right now, limiting ourselves to essential travel is the way to beat COVID-19. Thank you, and I will now turn it over to Dr. Borenstein.

- Thank you, Penny Borenstein, County Health Officer. Let me start by giving our daily numbers of the disease in our county. We have 232 individuals who have been tested and infected up to this point. We have four individuals who are in the hospital, two of them in intensive care, and we have 79% or 183 individuals who have recovered from the disease. So let me build on what Mr. Davison said regarding tourism. I want to thank him very much. Personally I want to thank him, and for all of the county I want to thank him. Visit SLO Cal has been an incredible partner with the county, in these very difficult times of the pandemic. Many business owners have made huge sacrifices, and they have lost their income, they've had to lay people off, and they are closing their doors, as we all know. Even through all of this though, local businesses and organizations like Visit SLO Cal have been these incredible partners, and

doing what's necessary to preserve the public's health, even when it has meant impact to their very own industry. As Chuck said, and you hear, tourism is a big public health concern, and now is not the time to visit the Central Coast. What we are doing is monitoring this closely. I again want to thank Visit SLO Cal, all of our industry partners for providing the information that helps us keep an eye on what is happening. So at this time, we feel like we are doing all that we need to do, and we will move forward together in partnership with our tourism friends, and look forward to the day when we can bring our visitors back to the county. So thank you for that, to all of the community. I do want to talk about testing further. As you know, I've spoken several times now about the two additional testing sites that we have in our county. We have one in south county, Grover Beach, which is seeing it's appointment slots filled day over day. That is at the Ramona Community Garden Center. We have a second site in Paso Robles which is at the Veterans Hall on Scott Avenue, and that one is not being filled. So I want to invite our north county friends, as well as people who live on the coast or anywhere, that you can get an appointment. We are opening those slots to anyone at this time, including asymptomatics, because we have not filled up our day over day capacity of 132 appointments. Remember that this is five days a week, Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. And we had previously indicated that you either had to be in a high-risk group, or have at least one symptom of the disease, but we want to continuously make more testing available in our community. So while we have additional capacity, we are absolutely asking that anyone who feels that they need a test, or warrant a test, to make an appointment. The appointments can be made through SLOready.org, that is the preferred mechanism to do so online, but for those individuals who either don't have the internet, or don't have the means to use that source, they can make an appointment by telephone. So the phone number for making an appointment is 888-634-1123. I'll repeat that, 888-634-1123. In addition to these two sites, I want to remind people that we continue to test at the public health lab for first responders, for healthcare workers, for emergency workers. We continue to have many of our Urgent Care sites in the county available for testing, and many of our private healthcare facilities, independent practices as well as our Community Health Centers continue to test for this disease. Testing, as you know, is one of the state's criteria that will help us move to where we need to get to in terms of reopening, and so we want to maintain our testing capacity, and our testing utilization. So speaking of reopening, I do want to report where we're at as a county in that regard. I am pleased to report that the state is hearing our pleas to move faster. I have had direct dialog with the State Public Health Director on several occasions now, and I believe from our conversation that we are being heard, and that in the days to come, not weeks to come, but in the days to come, that we will find a path forward in this county to move further into the state's stage two. We're not there yet, and we continue to indulge the patience of our community, but I do believe that we have the means to move forward. In the meantime, the Governor has taken some of the later stage two areas, and moved them statewide into the early stage two. So there is some movement forward in some parts of our businesses, and our organizations that can, effectively immediately, begin to open up for business. Those areas in particular are office-based businesses. I want to point out, however, that telecommuting is still the preferred option, and that is especially true for people who are at higher risk for bad outcomes from the disease. So again, individuals over the age of 65, individuals with medical conditions, and in offices where physical distancing is not very feasible. The telecommuting is preferred, but office-based businesses may return to their offices for doing work if that meets their needs. Additionally, child care may resume, and not be limited just to the essential workforce. I know as we start to go back to business as a community, many working parents who don't have childcare options will find this to be relieving news, that childcare can now take place, not just for

our first responders and healthcare workers, but for all sectors of the community. Additionally, landscaping, landscape gardening, pet grooming, which is something that we had already done, is now approved at the state level, car washes, as well as outdoor museums, and open gallery spaces. So those are some areas in which on a statewide basis we are moving forward together. In the meantime, as we continue to wait for and dialog with our state partners, particularly the California Department of Public Health, as we attempt to move further into stage two, with our restaurant opening, with our in-store retail opportunities, we want to point out to these businesses that there are things that they can do to prepare. And so we have put up the additional state guidance now on our website, so that local businesses can look at the full range of things they should be thinking about and doing, and preparing for their self-certification that they are ready to open those doors. So we have guidance on our website, and I'm gonna give you a different URL. You can get to it from readyslo.org, but if you want to go right to the state guidance, particularly for restaurants or retail, the restaurants, I'm not certain actually the state has their retail guidance up yet. For restaurants though, you can go to emergencyslo.org/reopen. And the state now has posted on their website, but we've provided a direct link through our readyslo.org, and at that URL. I'll say it one more time, emergencyslo.org/reopen. With that, I will turn it over to any of our speakers for questions or comments.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein, the testing you said is available now to anyone. Is that both locations, Grover Beach, Paso Robles, or county lab, I mean, anywhere now anyone has that--

- Yeah, so I will repeat the question. I've gotten mixed reviews on whether or not the audience can hear the questions. It was, can asymptomatics go anywhere for testing? People who can make their own appointments without a physician referral at the two sites, Grover Beach and Paso Robles can do so. They're gonna have better luck getting an appointment in a timely manner at the Paso Robles site. But we're not gonna restrict based on location. The Public Health Laboratory continues to make it's limited testing available to those higher risk groups where we need immediate turnaround both for considerations of how to manage the disease of a hospitalized patient, as well as knowing if that fire agency worker needs to be off work, or the healthcare worker, or if we need to find out of the disease in an individual in the nursing home may be COVID. So we continue to utilize our resources at the Public Health Department for individuals who present the greatest challenges, or highest risk to our community, and to the services that they are providing. The other places that people can go for testing, like Urgent Care facilities, I would imagine, although I can't answer for all of them, that they are still looking for at least some level of symptomatology, because they are billing for the test.

- [Man] And then you also said additional testing sites would open up a couple of weeks ago. Are those still coming online here?

- So, in addition, the county plans to open more testing. That will actually open to the community at the very beginning of June. Beginning next week we are setting up to do follow-up testing at California Men's Colony, we're gonna open it up to other essential workforce areas in the coming week, but by

June we expect to be going community by community throughout the county to make available regional, and very hyper-local testing opportunities.

- [Man] So the testing capability right now, is there kind of an approximate number you're seeing on a daily basis?

- We're in the three to 400 a day, of daily testing.

- [Man] As far as retail, what's the current situation? Because I've actually gone to downtown SLO recently, and I've seen some retails doing more or less, we're gonna have the store open, and have people come in and try on things, jewelry stores are saying well come in, we have essential precious metals that we can sell you. I think there's some confusion around that. Maybe you can clarify, and I personally don't know.

- So the question is, what is the situation for retail businesses right now? And the state as well as the county in that we are falling under the state's Resilience Roadmap, is allowing curbside pickup of all manner of retail products as well as delivery. And so that's for any manner of retail business. Previously we had, and we still allow some in-store retail, obviously big box stores are open because they sell groceries and pharmacy products, but we've previously opened to fabric stores, because of mask-making. We had done pet grooming previously, so your bookstores, your toy stores, your shoe stores, all manner of retail business, jewelry stores you mentioned, at this moment in time are not allowed to be open for in-store retail. We hope to move quickly in that direction.

- [Man] And then to piggyback on that, with dine-in, I know that's big, the state came out with some guidelines for when it does open up. Where are we with that? Do you foresee that opening up relatively soon?

- So the question is similarly, where do restaurants stand? And they stand in the same place in the state plan as does in-store retail, which is as soon as this county is given the green light under the state's purview to move ahead in the state stage two Resilience Roadmap, that we are prepared to allow that to happen immediately in this county. We continue to be hopeful that that will be a matter of days, and not weeks. And that was what I was referring to with respect to my dialog with people in decision-making positions at the state.

- [Man] One last thing. In terms of when it does happen for dine-in, I've heard some cities are considering having street-side seating. Is that something the county's worked with any of the jurisdictions on?

- I'll turn some of this over to Mr. Horton, but what I can say is each individual city is gonna have to determine what they can allow given their code enforcement. From a public health perspective though, as long as they're abiding by all the sanitary mitigation measures in terms of distancing, of having family groups together and separated, hand sanitation available, hand washing available to their patrons, from a public health perspective, outdoor dining in fact is preferable in a lot of ways. But in terms of the city ordinances and code enforcement, I'm gonna let Mr. Horton answer that part of the question.

- [Wade] I have nothing to add.

- Or he has nothing to add, so basically the cities will be making decisions about what they can accommodate within the framework of their municipalities in terms of streets, or sidewalks, or what have you.

- [Man] Do you have anyone specifically considering that at this point, to actually move things onto the street?

- Yeah, so we have heard from a number of our cities that are looking at specific businesses that may be able to have that safely, because we still need safety for pedestrians, we still need to have places that cars can park safely. But yes, I think a number of the cities are looking at ways that they can assist the restaurant industry with having more consumers within a larger space that might include outdoors.

- [Man] I got a couple questions for Chuck. So you mentioned there's about 23,000 jobs in the county that are directly associated with tourism. Any kind of idea, estimation, on how many of those have been lost in the last two months?

- Yeah, so the question was, of the approximate 23,000 travel and hospitality jobs in the county, how many of those have been lost? Our best estimate is it's somewhere around 50%. That's what we're seeing statewide, that's what we saw in the initial few weeks. We got some initial WARN, some of the initial WARN reporting that came out, but that has started to lag a little bit in our ability to get that information. So it's definitely been a tremendous impact on the industry itself.

- [Man] I asked Dr. Borenstein I believe this on Monday, but your concerns with people coming from out of the area, it seems like it has picked up, particularly on the coastline, the beaches recently, with the warm weather. Any concerns that people are not heeding the advice from the county here to stay away?

- Yeah, I go back to what I said earlier, that we're really fortunate on how much the tourism and hospitality industry has pressed into this. Outside of probably healthcare, tourism and hospitality has been the most impacted sector, coming out of COVID-19. And so you've got businesses that are shutting down, businesses that are losing money, and even in the businesses that have remained open like hotels under the essential workforce, there has not been an outbreak of one person at any of these establishments. So when they are staying open, they are doing the right thing, and we encourage that, obviously, to continue. As Dr. Borenstein and Mr. Horton have said, we are under an ordinance right now of essential travel only. And so we are not advertising, we are not encouraging people to come here. We are holding our ground in that place, and we know that that will one day return, and when it does, we will be joyous and excited to help bring those people back to our community, but today is not that time.

- [Man] One last question. We heard yesterday, California State University System may remain online even through the fall. President Armstrong at Cal Poly today issued a statement essentially saying it's still to be determined. Just wanted to ask you from an economic standpoint, from a tourism standpoint, how big of a deal would that be if Cal Poly were to remain online, and the majority of those students would not be here in the San Luis Obispo area?

- Yeah, so the question was, what is the impact of Cal Poly not returning to in-person classes in the fall, from an economic and tourism standpoint? We're really fortunate to have such great partners in Cal Poly and the university. I mean, they are a staple in this community. Not only from an economic standpoint, but really there is a missing piece of the heartbeat right now, with those students not being in our community. They make up so much of the vibrancy that happens here. So we are hopeful that that will be sooner rather than later, that they will return back to the community, obviously in a safe measure, because it plays such a vital role in who we are as a county.

- [Man] But with those students, when they are in, I mean, their parents, family members, friends, those are the ones that are also helping to fill hotels, restaurants, shops, right? So a huge economic blow if they do stay home in the fall?

- Yeah, so I think you can see, even in downtown San Luis Obispo right now, when you walk the streets, obviously we're under a stay-at-home order, but normally in the summer Cal Poly would be out, and you would have San Luis Obispo filled with leisure travelers who are here visiting. That's not going to be the case, at least over the next month or so, and it's not gonna be the case with Cal Poly students. And so anytime that you take that out of our community, again you lose part of the heartbeat and the pulse, but you lose the economic spend not only of those individuals, but of their parents, of their friends and their family. And again, we've heard so many stories of people who first found this destination because their nephew went to school at Cal Poly, and they came here to visit for the first time, and now they

come back as a traveler over and over again. And so we look forward to the day when those people can all come and enjoy this wonderful place that we're blessed enough to call home.

- [Woman] One more question.

- Thank you.

- Thank you all again for coming today, and for tuning in online and on TV. A few final reminders, as Anne Robin said today, this month is Mental Health Awareness Month. And as she said, if you're feeling stressed or alone, please know that you are not. There are people that want to try and help. Please reach out to some of the resources she mentioned, the SLO Hotline, or your local Behavioral Health Department at SLObehavioralhealth.org. On Friday we will again have three speakers. Along with Dr. Borenstein we will be joined by SLO Food Bank's Emergency Operations Manager, Garret Olson so give important updates from the Food Bank of SLO County. We will also have Darren Smith, the CEO of Compass Health to talk about safety precautions in local skilled nursing facilities. Please tune in for more information on those topics. Remember that our county information is all located on readySLO.org, including the phone numbers for our phone assistance center, our public health information line, and our enforcement line. Thank you again for tuning in today at San Luis Obispo Public Health's Facebook Page, our county website, and on KSPY and KCOY, and remember that you can watch these briefings later at Public Access Channel 21 at midnight, 8:00 a.m., and 5:00 p.m. Thank you again for staying engaged. Be well, and we'll see you on Friday.