

- Today is Wednesday, September 16th, 2020. My name is Michelle Schwarzman, and I'd like to welcome you all to the San Luis Obispo County Weekly COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon, we have three speakers for you. We will begin with Alysia Hendry, San Luis Obispo County suicide prevention coordinator, and co-chair of the SLO County Suicide Prevention Council. She will be followed by Meghan Boaz Alvarez, clinical director at Transitions-Mental Health Association and other co-chair for SLO County Suicide Prevention Council. And last but not least, we will have county health officer Dr. Penny Borenstein. Thank you to our American sign language interpreter, Shelley Lawrence. And now San Luis Obispo County suicide prevention coordinator, Alysia Hendry.

- All right, hello. My name is Alysia Hendry, and I am the County of San Luis Obispo Behavioral Health Department suicide prevention coordinator and the co-chair of the Suicide Prevention Council of San Luis Obispo County. September is nationally recognized as suicide prevention month. It is a time to collectively acknowledge that suicide is a leading cause of death in our country and in our county, and also a time to honor those we have lost to suicide, along with their friends and families, and everyone who faces the challenge of waking up every day, living with the pain that sometimes makes this world seemingly unbearable.

Behavioral health sees you, honors you, and wants you to know that you are not alone. While we know that mental health challenges can lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviors, we also know that adversity and threats to our safety can lead to the same thoughts and behaviors. San Luis Obispo County has had its fair share of difficult times in recent months. And while we wish there was a secret recipe or magical pill that could resolve these challenges, we remain hopeful that our community will prove to be resilient as we navigate these difficult times together. It is true that we do not know the lasting economic, social and emotional effects that will be felt across the county in the months and years to come.

So today I would like to leave you with some information that you can integrate into your daily routine to help make this world a more desirable place to live for yourself, for your loved ones, and for your community, because none of us are truly well until all of us are truly well. Suicide prevention is not about death. It is about life. Myself, Behavioral Health, and the Suicide Prevention Council of SLO County welcome you to join us in creating a world where everyone wants to live. We can all start by creating healthy boundaries for ourselves. Make sure that you have at least one moment to yourself daily to check in. Check in physically. How are you feeling?

And check in emotionally. How are you doing? Write down what is going well and write down if something is difficult for you.

If you notice change in behavior in someone that you care about or someone who is close to you, either through work, or as a neighbor, or otherwise, ask them about it. Point the things out that you notice and remind them that you're asking because you care. Conversely, if you are experiencing emotional challenges, reach out to someone you trust. It is often incredibly difficult to reach out, but it's also incredibly brave. Listen and listen again. Not every situation needs to be fixed. Sometimes people need to freely discuss what is bothering them and how it is challenging them. Validate their feelings. Acknowledge that life can be hard and that their situation can be hard, but also that you're there for them.

Keep in mind that seeking mental health support is something that everybody can do. Think of going to therapy as like a mental exercise or like taking your multivitamin. Build your mental muscles that when adversity does present itself or a mental health challenge does arise, you're prepared to take them on. Resources are available for everyone who needs them. See the slides for details or visit [readyslo.com](https://www.readyslo.com). In addition to the other resources listed, I would like to highlight two California-based resources, the Friendship Line, which is a 24-hour warm line and crisis line for adults 60 and over, and also for adults who are living with disabilities. The Trevor Project also has a 24-hour crisis line for LGBTQ+ youth and transitional aged youth. So make the call any time. They're there to support you.

Believe that when someone is going through crisis, it is very real for them, even if it doesn't seem that way to you. Fear, abuse, discrimination, mental health, and substance use challenges, anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders can often cause internal stress that others on the outside can't always see. So when someone is in crisis, believe them, support them, ask them how you can help them and reach out for extra support if you need it. Be a safe and trusted adult to our youth. Create an environment where youth feel comfortable and safe coming to you when they experience something difficult. If you know a trans person, use their affirming pronouns. Research shows that this simple dignifying act saves lives.

And finally, help us in reducing the stigma around suicide. Take a training. Request a presentation. get involved in the suicide prevention council. Join the local chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Attend a National Alliance on Mental Illness Support Group. Donate to our local hotline, and start changing the way you talk about suicide. For example, rather than seeing that someone

committed suicide, use the term died by suicide. This helps to promote stigma-free language that can help survivors and those struggling through their grief and recovery. The only way through the future of suicide prevention is together. I welcome you to join me, the Behavioral Health Department, and all of our community partners in making our county not only a happy place to be, but a safe place for all. Thank you. I would now like to introduce Meghan Boaz Alvarez, the clinical director at Transitions-Mental Health Association and my fellow co-chair of the Suicide Prevention Council. Thank you.

- Thanks Alysia. Good afternoon. We're currently experiencing incredibly difficult and uncertain times. Individuals with mental health issues may have a harder time than usual, and people without any underlying mental health conditions might be finding themselves struggling with depression, anxiety, or even just the effects of the ongoing isolation and disconnection from family and friends. For most of us, not having that usual access to our supports, friends, family can't help but have an impact. And it's especially important right now to notice when somebody you care about might be in trouble and need some help. Depression, anxiety, drug or alcohol problems, all of these things can be warning signs of suicide, but it's also important to remember that individuals who don't have any of those problems can be at risk. Any one of us can reach a point where our resources are tapped and our ability to cope is just stretched too thin.

So I wanted to talk a little bit this afternoon about some of the warning signs of suicide and what to look for, things that might indicate somebody needs some help. Express feelings of hopelessness is a warning sign of suicide. Statements like, I just don't think things are ever going to get better. Seeing oneself as a burden. Statements like, my family would be better off without me. That's something to pay attention to. So usually we tell people to look for withdrawal from family and friends and isolation, discontinuing usual activities. I feel like that's a tough one to assess for right now, because most of us are a little disconnected from our family and friends and usual activities. So what I would say about that is pay attention to those who are close to you. Look for signs of disconnection. If you've got a Zoom with somebody and they seem kind of withdrawn, check in, ask how they're doing. Unusual changes in mood or behavior are something to look for. And somebody struggling with depression or anxiety might need some additional attention or support. Anger and irritability can be warning signs of depression and suicide as well. I'd like to mention that one because I think it's not... It's maybe not on our

radar as much as some of the other signs. So that sounds like a lot to try to think about, try to assess for, try to look for, but I think it's simpler than that. And what it really comes down to is if somebody close to you looks like they're struggling, take the time to reach out and connect, and ask them, hey, are you okay? That simple act of saying, "I noticed you seem like you're having a hard time. I'm wondering if you're doing okay." That reached out could save somebody's life.

We know from our interviews with suicide attempt survivors that on the day that they made their attempt, if somebody had said, "Hey, are you doing okay?" or reached out to them, it might've changed the outcome. And that simple act is something that anyone of us can do. If you aren't sure who to call for help, we have several local resources that can be useful. I wanted to mention the National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI. They offer support for general information about mental health disorders. The San Luis Obispo Hotline is another resource that's available for crisis support, suicide intervention. It's also a great resource for just finding out about local community supports. If somebody needs a therapist, or a doctor, or a community support group, the SLO Hotline is a great resource for getting connected to different places for services. So if you don't know who to call, that's always a great resource. TMHA also offers family support groups. We support individuals who have a loved one struggling with a mental health issue, and our wellness centers offer a variety of support groups, social opportunities, and things to help folks in our community stay connected and supported. I wanted to mention just briefly two new programs that Transitions-Mental Health Association will be offering this fall. One is our brief therapy clinic.

We're noticing in our community that there may not be enough resources for folks. Somebody might be under insured or struggling with finding a therapist that takes their insurance. So we'll be offering short-term counseling at no cost for individuals in the community who have that need. And the other thing we're really excited to share today is that we'll be launching text support with our crisis line a little bit later this fall, so that there'll be an additional option for folks to reach out when they're in crisis. You can get more information about any of these programs by contacting the SLO Hotline. One of the numbers that's been scrolling this afternoon. And thank you for letting me talk about suicide warning signs this afternoon. I'd like to introduce county health officer Dr. Penny Borenstein. Thank you.

- Thank you so much Alysia and Meghan. I know I'm humbled by having the opportunity to come before you on a weekly basis and talk about COVID. I also

wanna make it clear that we in public health and myself are acutely aware that there's a lot more going on in the world than the communicable disease or the virus that transmits known as COVID and all the impacts. And along with that, to talk about suicide prevention is incredibly important as it relates to this disease and our community in general. We think of ourselves as a happy place. But especially during the time of COVID, I think people are struggling, so I really wanna say thank you to my friends across the aisle in behavioral health for really focusing on this this month and today. So with that, I will talk about what's going on in our community and in... Because it isn't changing that much, this is probably wearing on people. But I do have some good news.

So, we do stand at 3,316 cases today. That's an increase of 23 since yesterday. 93% or 3,091 have recovered, met the definition for recovered. And we have under 200 people who've been there for a number of days who are considered active cases and able to transmit in the community setting, who among those who are recovering at home. 13 individuals in the hospital, three of those are in the intensive care unit. So as I said that we haven't been making a lot of change with respect to our business, our economy, our schools, as you know, we continue in that purple or most restrictive tier.

But yesterday the state published its update as it does weekly on Tuesday. And I'm happy to report that our last week's metrics that got reported now have us meeting the next week less restrictive tier, or tier two, or the red tier. What that means is we're one week into a two-week requirement to stay in that situation where we are seeing less than 20 cases a day on average over the prior week, and a positivity rate of less than 8%. So we've been doing well on the positivity rate for some time now, but we are now beginning to see that our case rate is meeting that next lower metric. It is both a product of the case rate, and there also is an adjustment factor for the amount of testing. So we have been seeing a lot of increase in our testing. I'll talk about that in a moment, but those situations combined, decreased numbers, increased testing, low positivity rate, are putting us in sight of moving into the next most restrictive tier if we continue for another week, We hope that we'll be able to stay there in the red tier and even move forward because we need to continue those good metrics if and when we move into that next tier and we need to improve upon them to continue to move forward with additional business openings.

The school opening, just to remind you, happens only once we are in the red tier for no less than two weeks, then our schools can consider the opportunity for opening more broadly. So in the meantime and as I keep saying every week, to get us from point A to point B, where we continue to see decrease in our cases, I will repeat every week, wear face covering, keep your distance from others, avoid gatherings. If you are going to gather, please do so in very reasonable and responsible ways, meaning with very small numbers of people, one friend, keep to only that one friend, or one family, at most, two. For a period of three weeks, develop a contract that you are only gonna gather with those people over that period of time. And even when you do, do so outdoors with mask and physical distancing. Nothing new here, but we need to continue to do these things, so that we can get to the next place in our community functioning.

So with respect to testing data, we have seen a lot more testing in recent weeks. Part of that was Cal Poly's coming back to school, The testing numbers went up. But as I've been saying for a number of weeks, we now have the ability to test in our community sites anyone who needs a test. We've also added to our metrics on our website additional information. Recently, we added ethnicity, we added occupation, and we also now have a place where we're linking to the state metrics, so that you can see at any given point in time where we are over the past two weeks on the Blueprint for a Safer Economy. We have made one other change, which is removing a particular table related to the amount of testing that has gone on in our county. And the reason for that is we have always said from the beginning when we started to post the testing numbers, both the County Public Health Lab and other laboratories, that it is incomplete information.

We felt it was very important at the beginning to differentiate how much public health lab testing was going on, how much other testing was going on. When testing was more restrictive, we like to give people an idea of how much testing was being done and where it was being done. Because of the ongoing issues with regard to the accuracy and completeness of that data, and now with the state monitoring, what is really the important mess metric, the positivity rate for our county, we have decided to point people to the state data, which is more complete, and more accurate, and what we are gonna be measured against. So for that reason, we have pulled down the part of our website which referenced the number of tests done in different settings. We've gotten a fair bit of feedback on that.

People watch our website very closely. Thank you for that. But because of the number of questions related to that, I felt it was important to explain that change.

The last thing I want to just reference again, as we said last week, that we'd be forthcoming with guidance around Halloween. Halloween is a little over a month away. We learned yesterday that the state is planning to issue guidance for how to safely celebrate Halloween. We do not want to tell our children and our adult children to not celebrate Halloween, but we would like at this point, knowing that the state is going to come out with guidance, to allow the state's guidance to come first. When we've gotten ahead of the state in a number of situations, we've had to then reconcile our guidance with state guidance. So we thought the best thing to do, since we still have some time, is to wait on that state guidance and then build upon that in issuing any specifics that we might think are important for our local community. So that's why you're not seeing anything quite yet from us on Halloween messaging. And with that, I have completed my talking points and welcome you to ask any questions you may have of me or others.

- [Audience Member] Dr. Borenstein, so we're close to the red tier or the county's close to the red tier, exciting news no doubt. What happens then? Remind the public. Should the county jump into the red tier, what sort of businesses would reopen?

- So a number of the businesses that were moved out doors, so fitness facilities, restaurants, personal care services, nail salons, tattoo parlors, indoor worship services, all of those things can, with modifications, still with distancing, with capacity limits at different levels, depending on the nature of the business, can begin to open for business indoors, and to do so with these modifications and capacity limits.

- [Audience Member] Say the numbers hold, the county does move in the red or is given the green light to move into tier two, how quickly would that happen? Would that be essentially instantaneous?

- Yes. So the question is when we were to move to the red tier, how quickly can we make that adjustment? In that, I think we are prepared for that to happen as soon as a week from yesterday. Businesses should be thinking about that now. They already have their safety plans in place. They need to dust them off. They need to revisit all of the guidance for their businesses sectors. And for those who want to make that transition, they can be prepared to begin to do that. Some may not want

to. We see lots of parklets and lots of areas around the county. They've done quite well with outdoor dining. That is still preferred in terms of disease transmission. But for those businesses that feel that their businesses model needs to make these additional adjustments, they should begin to think about that now.

- [Audience Member] And you've mentioned a lot of people are checking the readyslo.org website which is great. I know a lot of people are probably doing the state. One thing they may notice is there's counties that are already in the red much larger than San Luis Obispo. I know we've addressed it before. San Diego and Orange County. Just curious, I mean, is there anything... I know there's a leader in Northern California that had said smaller counties may be at a disadvantage in terms of the numbers. What can you point to that when you see counties much larger than San Luis Obispo already needing metrics even though they have a much larger population than this one?

- I know it sounds simple, but I had the opportunity last week to be out of our county for the first time for a short period of time. It gained my attention how much COVID awareness and COVID compliance was going on, and I think it's as simple as that, that we all pull together. That's our youth, that's our students, that's our adults, and regardless of your geography, or political persuasion, your work sector. I know it sounds redundant, but I keep saying the same things. Just do all these protective measures and we can begin to enjoy ourselves a little bit more.

- [Audience Member] Yeah, the county, as you mentioned, has met the criteria for the possibility to move into the next tier. How optimistic are you that we will keep those numbers and move into the next tier?

- So because there's a lag, we have a bit of ability to look at the timeframe that will affect our next week metrics, and so I'm fairly optimistic, unless we've gotten something wrong, that we will be able to move forward next week. I can't promise you that I'm correct because there are adjustments to the data when they get pulled. It's complicated about what constitutes an episode, so there may be lag in reporting of cases that will go into our case numbers that we don't have yet, things of that sort. I'm relatively optimistic, but we are living very close to that line if you will. And so, what I don't wanna see happen to our county is what San Diego is looking at and others of two weeks forward, two weeks back. So I really do implore our community members, when we get there, to not over celebrate and to really understand that this is the long term in terms of all the protective measures that I

keep harping on. That's the only way we're gonna stay in the red and, even better, move forward.

- [Audience Member] So you're talking about businesses after if/when we get to the red tier, how those will change and be able to open indoors. What about things outside of businesses like sports? You mentioned schools a little bit earlier, but this won't obviously be a life back to normal for those things. How will things change for those aspects?

- Right. So life back to normal is when we get out of the tiers entirely. So even in the least restrictive tier, yellow, we're still not talking about big concert venues, we're still not talking about parades, we're still not talking about large weddings. So it's a step back toward where we had been, but we still have a long way to go. And as always, the long road for this is finding effective treatment or safe and effective vaccination that is taken up by the large proportion of the community, so that we are not facing down what some countries in Europe are now starting to see again is you let you guard down, you open up far and wide, and we can be right back where we were in terms of disease spread and, most importantly, hospitalizations and deaths. This county has been relatively spared all of that drama and trauma, but it is a communicable diseases. We still remain at risk if we were to let our guard down, so I'm constantly thanking our community for doing all that they are, saying that there is more that we can do so we can get our case numbers down, and then we have to keep doing it over a period of six months, nine months, 12 months. I'm not sure, maybe longer. With all of that said, I often get asked, are we ever gonna get back to life as we know it? I do believe that is the case, but we need to be patient and we need to reach out to our friends in different ways to make sure that we feel safe and secure and happy in this new form of life for the foreseeable future.

- [Audience Member] And another one, Dr. Borenstein. So I understand two large public school districts are looking to file for elementary school waivers, and the concern is on testing. So I understand they have to have some level of surveillance testing within the schools. Will the county be able to accommodate that testing need if and when those schools come back to in-person learning?

- I liken it to what we have with our skilled nursing facilities or our prisons, which is called surveillance testing as opposed to outbreak testing, very different. As part of school opening and part of school plans, they have to have in place a mechanism for ongoing testing. For schools, the recommendation, and this is not a mandate,

but it is a strong recommendation that there be surveillance testing of staff. We have been in communication with the school districts, with the County Office of Education, looked at staff numbers, looked at the timeline, looked at our capacity in testing in the county, as well as additional capacity that can be brought to bear by the school districts. You can mail away for tests and do it that way. So we think that it won't be a really hard reach if schools do want to go in that direction of opening with a surveillance testing program in place.

- [Audience Member] Another question for you real quick. Should the county go in the red here, you have more businesses reopen, albeit modified, it's naturally to believe that they may cause the case numbers to go back up, and then the counties can go back into the purple here, kind of yoyoing up and down. Are counties allowed? Is there a little buffer or a leeway so you just don't have that? Because as you reopen, it's natural to assume that there may be more spread and that creates a difficult situation for businesses and everyone else.

- Yeah, the state metrics are what they are for the foreseeable future. I heard Dr. Ghaly today on the governor's press conference address that very question and said, at least for these two basic metrics, they do not envision any exceptions. So that's why I continue to really harp on our community staying the course.

- [Audience Member] I've got one more question. To kinda add to that, so if say we get into the red tier and businesses are allowed to open indoors, what happens if we go over those metrics? Are businesses immediately forced to shutdown again?

- So as we have to achieve the metrics for two weeks to move forward, you also have to fail to meet the metrics of the tier you're in for a consecutive two weeks in order to have the retreat. So it's not a day in day out thing. It's a minimum of two weeks to move in either direction. One exception is actually a minimum of three weeks of being in a tier, two of those weeks meeting the next least restrictive metric to move forward. It's a little bit of nuance there, but... Okay, thank you.

- Thank you all for being here today and tuning in online and on TV. Just a few closing notes today mostly about testing. You can get all our county's COVID information on readyslo.org or by calling the phone assistance center or the prerecorded Public Health Information Line. We continue to offer free COVID-19 testing at a number of locations around the county. Currently, these testing sites are located in Arroyo Grande, San Luis Obispo, and Morro Bay. Starting next week, the Morro Bay location will close and move to Atascadero at the Pavilion on the

Lake. Appointments for the new Atascadero site will be available starting tomorrow. All other information about these sites and a link to make an appointment at these locations is located on readyslo.org under testing. Also a reminder that testing is available for many local primary care providers and urgent care centers, and a list of urgent care centers where you can get testing is found also on readyslo.org. These briefings are found live on our SLO County Public Health Facebook Page and on our county's homepage. They are also live-streamed on KCOY and KSBY's websites, and broadcast live on cable channel 13, as well rebroadcast on public-access channel 21 at midnight, 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. until the next briefing occurs. Thank you again for staying informed. Be well and we will see you here next Wednesday at 3:15.