

- Good afternoon. Today is Wednesday, September 23rd, 2020. My name is Michelle Shoresman and I'd like to welcome you to this week's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon, we will hear from County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein, County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director, Mr. Wade Horton is also here to take your questions. Thank you once again to our American Sign Language interpreter, Robin Bab, and now SLO County health officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Hello, good afternoon. So let me start with where we are in this county with respect to our case counts. We're at 3,479. 26 increase since yesterday. 92% or 3,208 have recovered, and 233 are recovering at home. We have seven individuals in the hospital, three of whom are in the intensive care unit. So our hospital metrics continue to look good in this county and that's the way we want to see it. Unfortunately, we have hit some new metrics at every level we had. The nation has surpassed 200,000 deaths. So I like to point out that is five to 10 times worse than the average flu year. Our state is at 15,000 now, deaths from COVID-19, and we have two new deaths to report in this county. One individual in their 30s and one in their 40s. So we don't like to see any deaths, but those were particularly heartbreaking.

So however, with that we have had good news of late. As I indicated last week, I had expectations that our metrics were moving us in a positive direction. That is true. We now have had the second consecutive week of being at metrics that put us in the red tier or what the state calls substantial as opposed to widespread transmission. And, this is a good sign that our community is making efforts, that our businesses, workers, patrons are following all of the recommendations for the most part that we recommend. I continue to advocate that we all do that. Our residential care facilities have prevented and managed small outbreaks reasonably quickly and well. So we haven't seen a lot of increase there. And in general, I hope that the messaging that we keep repeating about gatherings being the place, events where people come together from mixed households, where we see spread, that people continue to avoid those. And if they do come together, do so in small numbers with face coverings, outdoors and keeping distance. So all of these actions are helpful and thank you to our community and our businesses for staying the course.

So what does this mean for us? I have a slide up behind me. What the red tier allows is some changes with respect to our business operations. So there are both

capacity limits and also modifications that need to be made in each business sector. The capacity limits, as you see, are 50% allowance for malls, swap meets, retail, a 25% capacity or 100 maximum individuals in a facility, whichever is less. So 25% or less than 100 individuals in restaurants, in movie theaters, in places of worship and indoor museums. And then at the gyms and fitness centers, the capacity limitation is 10%. And that again is because of the nature of the activity taking place in that facility, being consistent with there being further and wider potential spread of disease when people are working out and exhaling with force.

So the other one other thing is the personal care services, actually, do not have capacity limits, but all of the sectors continue to have the same modifications needed, which is wearing of masks and distancing, use of plexiglass, sanitizing, all of the protective measures that we've been recommending. So personal care services. In addition to hair that has been allowed to be open, hair care services, also now we have nail services, nail care, tattoos, and massage and aesthetic services all fall under that personal care category.

With respect to schools, as I've mentioned previously, we have to remain in the red tier for a minimum of two weeks. So we'd have to stay there next week. And then in the following week, schools can consider opening for business, again, following school guidance, all the modifications that we recommend that is part of the state guidance related to school opening. All of this guidance can be found at [readyslo.org](https://www.readyslo.org). We've got it by industry specific, and all of those things can take place. Though they can take place, I want to emphasize that it is still more protective to continue to deliver services outside. So where services can be done outside, I hope a lot of you have been taking advantage of the outdoor dining opportunities with your family groups or your social bubble, but I would ask of our restaurants, even our gyms, I've heard from many people, it's lovely to exercise in this beautiful weather we enjoy in the Central Coast. So let's continue to do as much activity as we can outdoors.

In addition to the sectors that can move indoors, outdoor opportunities still exist for card rooms, for family entertainment centers, wineries and tasting rooms and other non-essential sectors. So the reason we want to do this is we want to avert going backwards, and we can if we continue with these days of 20, 30, 40 cases of day, we could potentially move back into the purple tier in a matter of two weeks time if we saw metrics that were worse than where we are right now. And if we were to have to move back, there is a three day period where businesses would be

notified that that is approaching, and before we would have to go back to those closures, there's a three day waiting period before implementation.

I just want to also highlight, we do have another slide up to remind people of what remains closed at this time. And I am very sensitive to the fact that there are many hardworking individuals in all of these business sectors who are waiting patiently for the opportunity of our community transmission to be low enough to move forward with most or many of the sectors. So what is still closed is adult rec leagues, bars, brew pubs, and breweries, community centers, group gatherings, as I've mentioned, indoor pools, indoor recreation. I'm trying to read the slide, live music, playgrounds, saunas, steamrooms, and hot tubs. So within facilities, within fitness facilities, hotels, pool settings. We still are asking that the saunas and hot tubs remain closed. Weddings, receptions, and other parties of that sort are still not allowed at this time. So I just want to, again, continue to implore of our residents that they can keep up all the good efforts. This is not a forever situation. I've said this since the beginning of the pandemic, it is good to celebrate our successes, but let's not be complacent. And it is important that we continue to get tested for this disease so that we can know where we are.

I want to next address some rumors related to testing because I've heard much of this. One is no, we shouldn't get tested because that will just drive our numbers up and then we will have to close down. That's a little bit like an ostrich head in the sand. We need to know where our disease cases are so that we can take action. It doesn't hurt us by having that information. It gives us the opportunity to advise people accordingly as to what they need to do. If they do test positive, it provides the opportunity for identifying asymptomatic spreaders and prevent further infection. So if we don't know who is infected, we're only likely to get more infections. So please don't think that if we avoid testing that we'll be out from under this.

The testing is safe. I know that we've talked about this before, but we continue to hear some concerns about potentially the actual act of swabbing the inside of the nose can cause some tissue damage. That has never happened. This test has been going on for decades, nasal pharyngeal, or other types of nasal swabs. I know that I have joked in the past about the really far back one going to the brain. I have ceased to use that kind of off-color humor, because some people have actually reported that they are concerned about the swab actually touching brain tissue.

And that is absolutely not the case. So I want to be clear about that. It also doesn't hurt us to have a large amount of testing.

The volume of testing that we do in this county, if it is higher than the state average actually helps adjust our metrics and brings our case rate down so that we can open up for business quicker. So please do get tested. Certainly if you have symptoms and even if you are uncertain, if you've been exposed, if you think you have been exposed, our testing opportunities remain wide open and the turnaround time has improved.

Our testing sites continue at Arroyo Grande, at Tuscadero at the pavilion for this week and next week, and our SLO Vets Hall. We also, today this afternoon from three to six, we are at Paso Robles, we're doing testing there. All of this information is on readyslo.org. And we will be testing at the end of the month for the first time at Heritage Ranch in the afternoon on September 30th. So again, go and get all that information. Either readyslo.org or emergencyslo.org/testing will take you right to the testing information.

The last thing that I wanted to mention today is we did rescind an order. That order that had remained in place from early on, it was revised at one point to apply only to skilled nursing facilities. We now have rescinded even that order. And here's why. Both at the federal and the state level, there has been new policy guidance delivered about how to safely provide visitation opportunities for close family members. It's very much recommended that only one visitor at a time. If the visit can take place outdoors again, all the better, but we have very much recognized that this has been a very excruciatingly difficult road for the clients, the residents of these skilled nursing facilities and their family members. Many of them are in fragile health conditions and mental health conditions, and this sense of abandonment, especially for those who may have memory issues and are not clear as to what is going on in this pandemic, the lack of opportunity to have that connection with their close loved ones has been very challenging.

So we are following the state guidance on this, and we've made sure that our providers are aware of it. They are, they're following this very closely. We've had the benefit of having limited spread in our facilities. And so we are urging the opportunity to move forward in this arena under very controlled and stringent conditions. Please do not attempt to visit a loved one if you are sick. You absolutely will have to wear a mask. You'll be temperature checked and there'll be limits on the visitation opportunities. But we would like to be able to see that move forward.

In accord, the facilities are now required to have additional mitigation efforts in place. That includes weekly testing of all the staff so that we will be able to identify any problems in a quicker way. So with that, I will turn it over for questions.

- [Mr. Ally] Dr. Borenstein, to move from the purple into the red, the county needed to average roughly just under 20 cases per day. What's it to move to the next tier, orange, and in light of there was a 26, you know, increase today, which is kind of a significant jump from where it's been recently?

- Yeah, haven't done that math in a little while. I think it's just, it's somewhere right below 14 cases per day in a county of our size. So it is a heavy lift. For those of you paying attention, we did seemingly meet that metric. I'm going to address that question head on this past week, and that does not comport with the data that we show on a daily basis. But I do want to say that is because the state draws their information from the earliest possible date of a new case, whereas ours is based on the report date. So if we get someone who we get a new report on today, but they had symptom onset a week ago, that case will actually be counted in the state system earlier. So that's just one example of, we've been getting quite a few questions about the difference in what you might see in our daily case count and what the state reflects in our metrics. So the mechanism by which a case gets a portion to a particular date varies based on a number of parameters.

- [Mr. Ally] 26 A day, but it could be a little bit less, I suppose?

- Right. Some of these might actually go into a prior week.

- [Mr. Ally] And I asked you this last week, I think it probably bears to say again, there's no buffer. I mentioned last week more businesses I go inside, it's probable, but there's a chance that the cases may just naturally arise and the county, there's no wiggle room. I mean, the numbers are the numbers, right?

- That is correct, which is why I ask of our business sector to continue to use all the protection measures and as much outdoor activity as they can, as well as the patrons to take great care in how they are moving through these business sectors.

- [Mr. Ally] And just lastly, for me, I know a lot of people are interested in the school reopening. I know you had mentioned it. After being in the red tier for two weeks and then schools can, if you want to really just clarify that, then they can be considered to reopen. And that includes all schools K through 12? College as well?

- Yeah, so college operates in a different set of sector and guidance. The K-12 or TK 12 would be allowed to open as long as they have a solid reopening plan that we have reviewed and accepted, and that they are complying with all of the guidance that is part of the state's school guidance.

- [Mr. Ally] Best case scenario then we could see students inside schools, how soon?

- In theory the construct could be as soon as October 6th. I'm not aware of any schools that are prepared to move that fast.

- [Female Reporter] Dr. Borenstein, I know you kind of explained how the calculation isn't what is shown day by day, but we've had several days this past last few days, over 20 new cases per day. Do you think that businesses should expect to close? And how soon would we have to move back into the purple if we continue on this path?

- So we would have to have our metrics revert to greater than approximately 20 cases per day. If we also have the opportunity to subtract CMC cases, we have had some of those, and we also have the opportunity to adjust the number of cases based on our testing volume. So I am hopeful that we have the means to stay in the red tier, but we're very close to the line if you will as I'm watching it progress over recent days. And so I think that accompanied with Mr. Ally's question about aren't we only gonna see cases as we start getting back into businesses? I don't think that that is a fait accompli. I continue to believe that it is within our hands to find that sweet spot between some measure of normalcy enjoying life, but doing it with limited numbers of people, staying home, when you're sick, hand washing, sanitation, not going in big numbers, et cetera. All of that, I actually think it's rather simple. Most of us have been very successful for a long time living with this disease circulating in our community. And I think if everybody complies that we can get there.

- [Female Reporter] And Dr. Borenstein, I know Halloween is still about a month away, but does the county have any guidance or any plans for that?

- Yeah, so as I've said in the past that the county does which to put out guidance related to Halloween and potentially other forthcoming holidays. We are having a phone call with the state today that on the agenda is to try to get a sense of their timeline for issuing guidance. I had previously said we wanted to wait for the state to issue something. If that's not forthcoming within the next week, we will probably issue something on our own; however, I want to point out that the CDC has issued

very extensive guidance, and we have posted that on readyslo.org. And that is a really good starting place for people to consider levels of risk related to Halloween and other holidays.

- [Male Reporter] A lot of people believe that this disease only afflicts the elderly, but you just mentioned today that we have one case in their 30s, another in their 40s. Without violating any HIPAA information, is there anything that you can offer as to these younger cases?

- Well, yes. I thought about getting this question and I do think it's important for people to understand what is meant by underlying conditions. We often put that as a parenthetical comma, died in their 30s or 40s with underlying conditions. One of these two individuals had conditions that any of us could have. For instance, high blood pressure, diabetes, you know, overweight. Two thirds of our population is overweight. So some of these things are not dramatically different than any of your friends and families walking around in their 30s, 40s, 50s. I also like to point out that I know I've heard a lot of that comment of late that it's mostly old people dying. It is true that as with most diseases people of older ages are more at risk. Absolutely. And they have been dying in much greater proportions from this illness, but there are still at least 20% of the population of those who have died as healthy individuals below the age of 65, or relatively healthy.

- [Moderator] More questions?

- Thank you.

- Thank you all again for being here and tuning in online and on TV. A few closing notes for today. As always, you can get all of our COVID-19 information at our readyslo.org website, or by calling our phone assistance center or the recorded public health information line. We continue to offer free, safe, and easy COVID-19 testing at a number of locations around the county. Dr. Borenstein mentioned most of them, but I'll just reiterate that we currently have testing sites in Arroyo Grande, San Luis Obispo, and Tuscadero. There is an additional afternoon testing site today in Paso Robles and then one in Heritage Ranch next Wednesday. Those last two are focused on local community members only. All information about these sites and links to make an appointment are at readyslo.org. Finally, these briefings are found live on our SLO County public health Facebook page, on our county website homepage, and live streamed on KCOY and KSBY's websites. They're also broadcast live on cable channel 13 and rebroadcast on cable channel 21 at midnight, 8:00 AM

and 5:00 PM until the next briefing occurs. Thank you again for staying informed, be well, and we'll see you here next Wednesday at 3:15.