

- Good afternoon. Today is Wednesday, October 28th, 2020. My name is Michelle Shoresman and I'd like to welcome you to San Luis Obispo County's weekly COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon, we will hear from two speakers. We will begin with San Luis Obispo County Health Officer, doctor Penny Borenstein, and she will be followed by San Luis Obispo County Clerk Recorder, Tommy Gong. And County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director, Wade Horton is also here and available to take your questions. Thank you to our American sign language interpreter, Julia Townson, and now San Luis Obispo County Health Officer doctor Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you, good afternoon. So on the cusp of November, we have just over 4,000 cases, 4,240 unfortunately we saw a big rise in the last 24 hours. We haven't seen that high number in a while, 49. I do wanna focus on the good news, we continue to see the vast majority of our cases having recovered 94%, and a number that I haven't really touted for a while is the number of active cases in our community. And we've been seeing low numbers, as low as 150, 171 today of people who are recovering at home. And why I point that out is because it's the people who are potentially in the community infected with COVID disease that are your source of transmission. So we'd like to see that number quite low, as well as our daily case count. We have had a bit of an uptick in our hospitalizations, we now have seven individuals in the hospital, one in intensive care, but we continue to have relatively low numbers throughout this pandemic, so that is the best news.

We came very close this week to hitting the orange tier. As you can see, we're now keeping a chart of where we are, not just within the color, across the colors, but within the color. And we came oh so close to getting into the orange range this week with a 4.0 cases per 100,000 population over the last week of metrics, as you know the state reports every Tuesday. So yesterday we learned that we were just on the border of orange with our case count, and we've been in orange with our positivity rate and our health metric rate. So this tells me we can do this as a community. I've been saying all along that we can find a way to co-exist with this virus, keeping our active cases down, keeping our new cases down, doing lots of testing, which we have been doing and trying to move forward.

I know very well that people are absolutely tired of this pandemic. I share that sentiment very much so. We're tired of wearing face masks, we're tired of not hugging our loved ones, we're tired of worrying about what comes next, if we'll ever travel again. But I know that we as a community have been staying at least steady

making some progress and so kudos to everyone for doing this. I do see some light with respect to some guidance that is coming out of the state. So in the past week or two, we have seen guidance related to theme parks and pro sports and skate parks and playgrounds opening up. And now we've learned in the past days that the state envisions putting out guidance for the performing arts, in addition to the production of music and film and TV that has been in place. We are now working with the central coast coalition of art leaders and looking forward to the state, providing guidance and looking at other types of guidance that are out there with that industry and being able to move forward. I thank everyone in all of these industries that have been waiting for their turn, so to speak, for their patience and their due diligence. I understand the frustration. I continue to support us moving forward every time we have the opportunity as given guidance from the state and the allowance to move forward but we have to do it under modified conditions. And with all the safety precautions in place. I don't want people to think this pandemic is over.

If folks have been paying attention, you know that we are seeing the highest case numbers ever in this country. In some parts of the country, we're seeing things take a turn for the worst and other parts of the world, particularly in Europe. And so, no matter how you're feeling about this, we are going to be with this pandemic for some time and the same messages that I've been sharing over and over again, simple steps that we can all take and we all need to of wearing masks, keeping distance, staying socially, virtually connected, outdoors, staying home when you're sick, staying within your social bubble. I can't emphasize these enough, even though I know you've heard it many times. So thank you for the good work that our community is doing, and let's keep it up.

I do wanna say a new thing about masks. There was a report that came out in a scientific journal, doctor Monica Gandhi, MD from UC San Francisco was the first to report on something that certainly makes sense, but we now have some evidence. That masks may not only be protective as we know it is for you protecting others. You've also heard me many times say, and it may also have a protective effect from you becoming sick and infected from someone else coughing or sneezing near you, or even talking loudly in your presence because you're wearing a mask that may protect you from infection. What we're now seeing is what it may also do is contribute to less severe illness, if you do become infected. So a concept we've had in the medical arena for a long time, a viral inoculum. So the actual number of

viruses that get into your system and infect a person when they are exposed is contributory to the severity of illness. So it may be why we're seeing a lot of asymptomatic illness. It may be part of the reason that we're seeing less hospitalization and less death, that the actual severity of the illness may be protected by the simple act of wearing a mask. So I guess I will leave it at that, but I thought that was important information to share in the realm of how masks protect us.

I do wanna circle back. Halloween and Día de los Muertos is coming this weekend. Just wanna remind folks one more time of the best ways that we can celebrate, buy candy for your children. If that's what you need to do to avoid trick or treating. I'm sure the candy industry will appreciate that. Work staying at home, watching scary movies, building haunted houses inside your house, car parades, virtual costume parties with your friends and neighbors or family. These are all great ways. I remind you. I know that some people will go trick or treating, and to please ask again, that people who do go out do so with their family units, keep distance from the treat givers and wear a mask. Even if you have a costume mask on wear a protective COVID-19 face covering. And again with Día de los Muertos, where individuals may be wanting to place altars, do it in the inside of your house in a window, do it outside the house better or virtually share with your friends and loved ones and neighbors. And if you are gonna do cemetery visits again, please keep the visits short or within your own household unit. And don't gather in crowds at the cemetery. All this guidance on the holidays is available at readyslo.org On the heels of Halloween, Thanksgiving will be upon us and we have begun to put together Thanksgiving guidance. We are again awaiting as we heard that the state will be coming out with more detailed guidance. And as with Halloween, if we don't get that by a time certain that we feel as necessary, we will go ahead and issue our own. At this point we are waiting to see what we get from the state health department.

And finally election. The election is upon us next Tuesday, election officials and workers and volunteers are working very hard to make this as safe as possible for our community and for themselves. And with that, mister Tommy Gong, who is our clerk recorder has been working very hard to ensure the public safety in this election season. And so I'm going to turn the microphone over to him to talk about the measures that they are taking. Thank you.

- Great, good afternoon. I'm Tommy Gong, your County clerk-recorder for San Luis Obispo County. And I guess just to set the stage a little bit about how we're conducting the election, it stems from some of the experiences that were occurring during the primary election in other States, cancellations of polling places, poll workers, essentially not having enough because of the fear for the coronavirus. And then of course we saw in the months later that they really started to show their results. As a result, many of the County election officials in the state started to discuss with the secretary state's office, how we were gonna conduct this election in November, in light of, under these conditions. So Governor Newsom had two executive orders calling for, the first thing was, every voter will receive a ballot in the mail automatically. And then after that, then they had some formulas in terms of how we would staff the polling places. So part of it is like for instance, we don't have our traditional polling places. We used to have 76 during the four days of voting, we gonna have 23 locations located throughout the County. And so advice to voters is number one is that, they should, that we consider a vote by mail voting, the safest option for voters. They're able to do it without any contact with the public or poll election workers or with other voters. And they're able to deliver the ballots to the post office. Postage paid at one of our 19 ballot drop-off locations throughout the County. And as well as the 23 voter service centers during the four days of voting. The four days of voting are gonna be from October 31st to November 3rd. So it begins on Halloween and then ends on November 3rd election day.

The first three days of voting, operational hours are from 9:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m. And then of course on election day, it'll be from 7:00 a.m to 8:00 p.m as tradition is. We want voters to be sure that if they do send their ballots at it's postmarked by election day, November 3rd, or you can turn it in person by 8:00 p.m. That's the deadline in that way. Now, if voters choose to vote in and oh, I guess I should give a little indicator of where we're at for this election. As of today, we received 97,000 ballots of open more ballots returned, and that's at least double of what we would typically receive at this time. It's only Wednesday. So I still have a few more days of receiving these ballots. One thing we've noticed is many voters are returning them in our Drop Boxes instead of at the post office. I think the post office was putting out the information to send. If you're gonna send a ballot, you send it out seven days before the election, but in this way, so more and more voters are turning them in our Drop Boxes. If a voter needs to vote in person, then we encourage them to vote early, meaning that we want them to vote during the first three days of voting,

if they can Saturday, Sunday and Monday because we all know that there will be more voters. There might be longer lines on election day. So we're encouraging folks to vote during the first three days.

We also, I wanna let voters know that we are employing all of this health and safety measures that have been recommended for election officials to have at their in-person voting locations. We do encourage voters to utilize face mask. It's not required, but we certainly encourage for voters to do so to keep everyone safe. We'll even have surgical masks for them to use, to give to them to use in case they didn't bring one with them. We asked voters to bring their own pen, black or blue ink in order to sign the roster and to mark your ballot. If they don't, we have one time use pens with which we'll issue to them and they can take home with them so that you know we wouldn't have to have, how do I say it? more pins to clean after the fact. And we will always enforce the physical distancing. So when you look at some of our voter service centers, they will be, there are markers on the ground to signify the six foot distance. We'll have sneeze guards in place for where the voters are gonna be in contact with the election workers for a longer period of time, primarily at the check-in points and voting booths and equipment will be cleaned out regular intervals throughout the day. During the four days of voting, we'll have hand sanitizer dispensers located throughout the voters service center as well. So we certainly are doing everything we can to make it safe for all. In case a voter cannot use a face mask. We're gonna do everything we can to still ensure their right to vote. So in this way, we have curbside voting, so a voter might not even have to get out of the car, we'll have outside voting options where we can give a voter their ballot with a clipboard to be able to mark outside. If we can designate depending on the size of the location, if we can designate a voting booth or two, that is distance apart, properly from the rest of the voting area, then that might be another option too. So it's dependent on each location between our 23 voter service centers. So at this point, I wanna turn it over for questions from the media for either me or doctor Bornstein.

- [Reporter] I've got a question for doctor Borenstein.

- Yes.

- [Reporter] The uptake today, 49 cases, which is almost, there was 50 cases in the four previous days combined. So that's obviously a big jump up. How much is that gonna impact any potential moving forward, as you've mentioned at the top,

almost into the orange this week. I mean, looking ahead, I mean, that seems like it might be a big detriment to moving forward.

- Yeah. We'd certainly like to see our numbers stay in the range of where we need to be consistently on day after day to get to orange and even lower to get move further. So 11, 12 cases better than the 20 that keeps us in red. When we have a day of 40 or 50, we have to either make it up somewhere or have the potential of moving backwards. If that becomes a trend, it caught my attention more than our usual daily accountant. We definitely see patterns hit when we've had our high days. A lot of it continues to be in North County, particularly Paso Robles that has been throughout this pandemic, the place that we see the highest number of daily cases. We also do know that we had a cluster on this particular day associated with our university. We get on top of those immediately and we've had good success in working with our university to not let, when we do have an outbreak or a cluster we're very good at tamping that down pretty quickly through testing and isolation and quarantine.

- [Reporter] There was a cluster within Cal poly within these 49 cases. Is there?

- Yes we did have a handful of those cases that are associated with a particular living situation, not on campus,

- [Reporter] Any number you can rely,

- I actually don't have that number off top my head.

- [Reporter] My last question. I mean, you mentioned Halloween, obviously it's coming up. It's a Saturday as well. Just how concerned are you about the potential for gatherings?

- I remain concerned that we have community members of all stripes, that some don't take this pandemic as seriously as the messaging that we consistently put out. And we very much are concerned every time there's a holiday that tends to in normal times bring lots of people together that we will pay for it two or three weeks down the line. So I can't say it strongly enough to our young people, to those who are continuing to gather in large numbers in other settings with families and friends, that please don't do it this weekend.

- [Reporter] Can you give an update on entry school waiver applications?

- Yes, let me see if I can off the top of my head. So I think going back to the beginning, we had 13 private schools. Most of those have moved forward with a full opening, either K-6, K-8, K-12 we are not hearing any problems out of the private school sector. We've heard back from quite a few families, as well as staff, that things are going well, that the mask wearing is actually easy for our youngsters. More difficult is distancing and they're doing quite well with trying to make sure all the protective measures are in place, health screenings, masks wearing, distancing, staying home when you're sick. In our public school sector, We now have four districts that have submitted for a waiver. Three of them have gotten approved. And are in various stages of implementation of bringing students in the elementary school grades back onto campus in the coming days. And then we also have been reviewing more general reopening plans from school districts that did not go through the elementary school waiver process, but now are allowed to open in the red tier. Yes.

- [Reporter] Do you have data where you can elaborate on false positives? Are we seeing them? At what rate? et cetera.

- We are beginning to see more antigen testing done, which has a lower sensitivity or set another way, a higher false positive rate, as well as false negatives. We put those into our system as a probable case. They do not count in our numbers but we work with the tested individual and or their provider to ensure that they do get the standard PCR test as a followup to ensure that we have an accurate result. We are not actually seeing much in the way of false results with that, but we are concerned that more providers are moving toward using antigen testing because of the speed of processing. And we're gonna keep our eyes on that.

- [Woman] Any other questions?

- Thank you.

- Thank you all for being here today and watching our press briefing as we head toward election day next week, and a County holiday the following week, I wanna let press briefing viewers know about some changes to our upcoming briefing schedule. There will be no COVID-19 media briefing next week to make room for election news coverage. The following week, our briefing will be rescheduled in honor of Veterans Day. We will instead hold that week's briefing on Thursday, November 12th at 3:15 p.m. After the 12th, we will resume our regular Wednesday afternoon briefing schedule until further notice. Between briefings, please feel free

to check our SLO County and SLO public health Social media changes for updates, reminders and news. You can also still get all our Counties COVID-19 information on readyslo.org, or by calling the 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. Appointments are currently available, five days a week in San Louis Obispo and Arroyo Grande, and three days a week in Paso Robles and Morro Bay. Same and next day appointments are often available and Saturday appointments are available in Paso Robles. All information and links to make appointments are available on readyslo.org. Finally, we encourage the public to view these briefings live online at keyt.com and ksby.com. There are also broadcast live on cable channel 13 and shortly after each briefing, we post these videos on our SLO County public health Facebook page and our County's home page. They will also continue to be rebroadcast on public access channel 21 at 8:00 a.m, 5:00 p.m and midnight until the next briefing occurs. Thank you for staying informed. Be well. And remember, we will not be seeing you here again until Thursday, November 12th at 3:15 p.m. Thank you.