

- Good afternoon. Today is Thursday, November 12th, 2020. My name is Michelle Schoresman and I'd like to welcome you to San Luis Obispo County's weekly COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon we will hear from San Luis Obispo County health officer Dr. Penny Borenstein. Thank you to our American sign language interpreter Robin Babb, and now Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you good afternoon. So COVID-19 continues we're nearly 5,000 cases. Today we're at 4,972 in the last 24 hours. That is an increase of 72 cases. We now only have 87% of all of our cases recovered and our highest number ever of active cases in the community. Hopefully they're not moving about the community but active cases recovering at home at 575. The good news is that our hospitalization rates remain low. We have five people in the hospital and two in intensive care.

So, by now I'm sure it is not news to anyone that we are collectively going in the wrong direction with COVID 19. We're seeing a dramatic rise in cases at the state level, at the national level, at the global level. And we are not inoculated from those outcomes. To give you some sense of what's happening at the state level. Hospitalizations are up about 50%. Intensive care admissions are up about 30%. We are again seeing a large number of outbreaks in skilled nursing facilities, 125 in the last month. Many states across the nation are reaching hospital capacity limits. And we would very much all like this to be over, but it's not. It is not going to be in some time. You can see what the case numbers look like in our County. And we are on course to be at our worst level since this pandemic began.

Lest I be all full of doom and gloom, I do wanna emphasize however that in our County, we continue to, for whatever reasons see less acute or less severe disease. And we see that the though the disease is spreading as fast many of our cases are asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic and we're not seeing the same impacts in our hospital rates. We again only have five individuals at this time in the hospital, but we very much are concerned. And following this because as has the case in many communities, as the cases go often you see the trailing increase in hospitalizations as well as fatality. So we have not had that experience. It doesn't mean that we won't we'll obviously continue to share that news with you on a daily basis, but hope that we can maintain our level of disease with respect to those in more dire straits.

So let me address Cal Poly head-on. I know we have been getting a lot of questions about the impact on our community related to Cal Poly students in particular having a large number of cases and it is true. However, I want to point out that only

about half of our cases as we're seeing these larger numbers are from the Cal Poly community. They are concerned, we are concerned, but we also see large numbers of cases still especially in North County. Some of the increase has also been this new and first real outbreak in Atascadero State Hospital. So lest anyone think that the situation is all about the university in our community it is not. That said Cal Poly administration and the leadership are aware that though the student body had been doing quite well for the first two months of being back onto campus or having in-person instruction at a limited level. A number of their students have started to not adhere to the guidance that we've been putting out week after week. We've seen that there have been large parties, gatherings, et cetera, and the numbers are going up.

Cal Poly however it has been a great partner with us. They are doing everything that they can to try to manage this disease. And they are able to isolate all the positive students on campus. They have backup capacity in hotel rooms if needed. They are quarantining students and they are doing a tremendous amount of testing, both in response to the disease and as part of screening ongoing. So one great benefit that our community has had from this high volume of testing at Cal Poly is that we've been able to stay in red for quite some time because of the high volume of testing and the adjustment factor. We are obviously on the cusp of purple however given where we are and no manner of testing is gonna make up for the amount of cases that we're seeing. We do, I do also want to remember to advise any families who have their students at Cal Poly, as well as the students themselves. That this is a good time to be quarantining. If you are looking at going home, Cal Poly does intend to release all of its on-campus students except for those that are under active isolation in quarantine. But there may be others who have been exposed and aren't aware of it yet. So, be cautious about your travel plans. And if you haven't been exposed yet, this is a really good time between now and the end of the semester for students to be staying to themselves.

So we want to do everything that we can to not move backward toward that end. We submitted to the state an adjudication form yesterday. What that means is the state is willing to engage in an interactive process with counties that either think that the data that they have is incorrect, or that there are special circumstances that may result in making different decisions about the tier structure. So we submitted our request to Cal Poly to consider a couple of things. One is we were able to find a medium-sized volume if you will of test results from another

healthcare provider that we're not getting into the state system. So we're looking for them to potentially rerun the numbers on that basis and potentially stave off our purple status for another week. We also did indicate that because of the circumstances of our university and the fact that we anticipate a large number of our campus community being gone in just a matter of a week or more that maybe we can have some concessions around that and see what the impact will be with four to 5,000 students gone from our community as of November 20th. So stay tuned on that, but I do want to point out again that whether it's Cal Poly or the rest of the community, far and away, we continue to see that gatherings are the main source of transmission.

And so we know that people are getting tired and they are coming together more often but I want to remind people what all of the responsible ways to come together are. So, go out and buy a coat if you must, but continue to enjoy our central coast weather and keep your get togethers with folks outdoors. Keep them very small, keep it to your social bubble. Number you know, being three households at a maximum. Keep your get togethers brief under two hours. Absolutely if you are sick, do not participate and continue to wash your hands frequently, keep your distance from others and use a face covering. And this applies even in the outdoor environment. When there's a lot of cases circulating in our community and many people who don't even know it because they don't have symptoms but they can still transmit, we need to double down on all of these preventative measures.

So, it is reasonably likely that we will be seeing ourselves back in the purple tier in a couple of weeks. What does that mean to our community? So for some it's really not much of a change. We now know that personal care services of all types, be it hair, nails, massage, tattoo will remain open with modifications. Retail businesses will have to reduce their indoor capacity. Many of our businesses have been doing a very good job already with the amount of customers they let in at a time. So I know that they can do this. They may need to have the customers come in at smaller numbers. The bigger impact is certainly to certain sectors like our gyms and our fitness centers, restaurants, museums. These would all have to cease indoor operations and go back to outdoor only operations when the time would come that we are in purple.

So let's talk about that timing. I, we do not have a date certain, but we want to have businesses thinking about this and preparing as they have been throughout this

pandemic. I know that they are probably exhausted by opening and closing and opening and closing. And the implications for a business model is significant. But when we do hit the purple tier whether it's in one more week or two more weeks, there's an allowance for an additional three days before these adjustments need to be made. So keep that in mind. We can do this. I know I've been saying it all along.

People just need to continue and not lose their patience, wear a mask consistently, do all of the same things that we've been saying. It will get harder as people are gathering indoors more. It will get harder over the holidays if people come together. So I continue to advise that we celebrate our holidays in different ways than we're used to in normal years. But I still remain convinced and our numbers have us in relatively good shape to many of the surrounding jurisdictions. So, please keep doing the hard work and we will get to the other side of this pandemic we will.

That said though, I do have some additional information that's coming out of the literature that I wanted to share. These are some additional pieces of information that have been unclear up to this point particularly around pregnancy for a long time. I and many others were saying there doesn't seem to be any particular impacts like where you stay with flu for instance or many other diseases where pregnant women have a harder time recovering from certain infectious diseases. With COVID we thought that they were doing better than the newer information seems to be showing. So two recent studies have shown that pregnant women in fact, do seem to have more severe complications from this illness, more hospitalizations, more intensive care, more often being put on ventilators and even a higher rate of fatalities.

So very much want pregnant women to be aware of that and take even extra precautions. As I think many have when women are pregnant, they tend to ramp up their caregiving mindset, but care for yourselves and make sure you're keeping yourself out of harm's way. With respect to the babies being born. We also have seen some impacts whereby a small percentage of infants seem to be born infected with COVID. It's not clear if it's at the time of birth or during pregnancy. But we have seen small percentages of that. But probably even more so is seeing the impacts on the pregnancy where preterm births and even pregnancy loss seems to be higher among those with COVID disease. And one other thing in the medical literature that is now coming to light is that it is not a one and done in many cases.

So I know we talk about how 10 days you're isolated. Most people are at home, everything goes fine. You go back to, you know, your revised normal life. But we are beginning to see now that there is a recidivism or some of the patients especially those who are of older age, so over age 65, those with underlying medical conditions, people who have been hospitalized for other reasons in the previous months are experiencing having to go back into the hospital because of additional impacts of the long-term effects of COVID. So as many as 10% of hospitalized patients are actually landing back in the hospital within the two months following their release. So I know that a lot of people like to focus on how it is a minor disease for many and that is true, And that is a very good thing. And in our County especially we are seeing mild or no disease in our younger people.

But there's still a great impact across the spectrum but especially for our vulnerable people, whereby even if they survive the disease and most do that this is a serious illness that can have lingering consequences. So I wanted to get that information out as well. And then the final thing I'm just gonna mention again is Thanksgiving is upon us. We've been waiting for the state guidance. And once again, we are likely to put out our own guidance if we don't get that from the state in the very near term. But since people are making their plans now, I would just reiterate that if you can celebrate your holiday upcoming without travel, without visitation, that is very much the preferred way especially given the disease and how it is spreading in, throughout the country. So I will just leave it at that and open it up for questions.

- [Questioner] Dr. Borenstein, when the County, if and when the County, and it certainly looks like the County will move unfortunately back into purple. Your projection, will this be a lengthy state with the numbers being as they are? I mean, it certainly seems like it could be an unfortunate lengthy state back into purple.

- Yeah so, from the blueprint for a safer economy, the rules if you will have that a County must remain in its tier for a minimum three weeks. That's consistent with the length of time it typically takes to move the needle on what we're seeing in terms of metrics. It's consistent with an incubation period of a couple of weeks you add on plus the amount of time it takes for people to recognize that they may be ill and need to go get a test. So, so three weeks is generally a minimum, both by virtue of state rules, and what you might expect to see in terms of a curve. As I mentioned, however, I am, you know, concerned that we've been showing as a community that we, you know, are not having quite the same staying power with all the protective measures. With the weather, driving people more indoors that it

might be a longer period of time, but I don't really have a good way to foresee the future. And I think it's really within all of our hands to continue to double down on the ways in which we can drive transmission down. We've done it before, I know that we can do it again.

- [Questioner] Yeah, I think question. And this may be better suited for president Armstrong unfortunately he's not here but, you said you're working extensively with Cal Poly. Are they, do you know, is there any changes with their current policies with students on camp, anything like that maybe you could share with us in terms of you really combating this recent outbreak with the students?

- Yeah so you're right that those questions really should be addressed to Cal Poly administration. What I can tell you is they are very early and in partnership with us identifying students, isolating them, quarantining them, providing wraparound services, providing meals as needed, taking enforcement actions as needed and doing very robust and widespread testing. Both for those who may have been exposed as well as the campus community in general. As well as making it available and recommended for the off-campus population.

- [Questioner] Another question, just one more here. So in regards to schools, what does happen elementary, high school et cetera, when the County goes back into purple.

- Yeah, thank you for that. So, K through 12 schools have a couple of options. So certainly those schools that have already opened even if it's partial opening and they have a plan to continue further they may continue to bring students back onto an already open campus. And that's at any grade level. For those that have not opened, when we do get to purple those schools, individual schools that have not opened, this is not just, if a district has partially opened that other schools in the district can open, it's by school-by-school. They would not be afforded the opportunity to open while in purple. However the waiver process for elementary school still exists. I do want to iterate that we have not, we do have quite a few students especially in the private sector but through special needs students, cohorts. We, there is a lot of student activity going on on campuses, and our schools have been doing a great job at managing that and we are not seeing outbreaks in that setting at this time. So you've heard me say many times before, for a variety of reasons, our economy, our families, our workforce, our students needs developmentally and educationally that I would really much like to see schools move forward as quickly and as they can. So we're gonna support that

opportunity. We've been working with them on supporting testing opportunities for those that are open so that they can have eyes on the situation in their schools.

- [Questioner] Dr. Borenstein, do you have any comment regarding Cal Poly at isolating students off campus at hotels in SLO.

- Not really. If they, you know, we, the County have had, we've had contracts with hotels in all parts of the County, and we've used them at times when we've had people who didn't have other opportunities for alternate living situations when they needed to be safe. You know, homeless individuals, people who are living in large congregate settings. So it very much falls into that same category.

- [Questioner] And in the occupation categories on readyslo.org, if a Cal Poly student, I know they're counted as part of the higher education category but if they are an off-campus student and report both that they work at a restaurant and our student, what category do they fall under?

- That's is a very good question. What category does someone who is both a full-time student, and a full-time restaurant marker for instance, what category would we put them under? And I don't, I'm, I will have to get back to you on that. I know that if we do, if they're a full-time student and maybe only do one or two shifts a week at a job, we would put them as a student, vice versa. If they, you know, if their primary time was spent in an occupation and they were taking, you know some classes, then we would probably do the reverse. But I will look into that.

- [Questioner] Can you give us a status update on the Cal Poly facility? The standby facility?

- Yes thank you. So the alternate cares site that we, it was built at the early on in this pandemic, it is still available. Cal Poly has communicated to us. They will continue to make that available to the County should it be needed. Our expectation is it won't based on what we're seeing in terms of, you know, hospitalization rates if things were to get dramatically worse and we needed it would be available to us.

- [Questioner] And Dr. Borenstein you mentioned some test results we're not getting into the state system, can you explain that a little more? Has that been resolved?

- Yeah so, you know, as providers are using different methodologies, you know, rapid tests in the particular case at hand, they as new, we've had the same situation in the public health lab. It takes some time when you bring a new test online to get

the electronic, you know, the management's, information management system to tie into the state system. So that's we got caught at a stage where a provider had just turned over the tests that they were using and they weren't yet getting into the system. So we, we think we have that now resolved.

- [Michelle] Anything else.

- Thank you.

- Thank you all for tuning in today. Just one new announcement for today there will be a Zoom town hall this Monday evening for parents who have questions about their children, who might be returning to school. That will be from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM on Monday the 16th. And that is a joint project between the County public health department and the SLO County Office of Education. For more details on that you can go to www.S-L-O-C-O-E.org. Also, as we close today, we have one request for our community members. If you receive a call from the SLO County Public Health Department contact tracing team, please answer that call. Our team is working hard to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our community, but we can't do it without you. They will not be asking for financial or other personal information. They simply want to inform you that you may have been exposed or help you determine contacts that should be informed if you are positive. Please help them help our community. You can still get all our counties COVID-19 information on readyslo.org, or by calling the phone assistance center or the 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 still available, five days a week in San Luis 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 the information about these sites and links for appointments are already at readyslo.org. Next week our briefing we'll return to Wednesday at 3:15 PM. We encourage you to watch live online at keyt.com, ksby.com or on TV live on cable channel 13. Shortly after each briefing, we post the videos on SLO County Public Health's Facebook page, on our county's homepage, and on the County of SLO YouTube channel. They also continue to be rebroadcast on public access channel 21 at 8:00 AM, 5:00 PM and midnight each day until the next briefing occurs. Thank you for staying informed. Be well. And we'll see you here next Wednesday at 3:15 PM.