

- Today is Wednesday, November 18th, 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, Robyn Bob, and now San Luis Obispo County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you. Good afternoon. So here we are into November with sadly our case counts going up. We stand today at 5,400 even, that's an increase of 72, 79 cases, I'm sorry, since yesterday. 85% have recovered and we have our highest number to date of active cases in the community isolating at home, but we are near 750 of them, exactly 748. So I want to note that just since Monday, we, I mean, sorry, over the last two weeks we have had over 700 cases and 65 on average a day.

However, on the positive note, I want to continue to remind folks that an important metric, though not measured at this time by the state remains our hospitalizations, which in this county continued to be relatively low. 10 individuals in the hospital. One of them are in intensive care. I also do need to report that since I last came before the media, we've had two additional deaths. And while our numbers of deaths in this county also remain low, compared to all of the jurisdictions around us, our per capita case is low compared to the national rates. These are still two lives that were lost prematurely and their family certainly mourn them and we send out our sympathies.

So I'm here to report, if anyone has not yet heard that we have regressed to the purple tier. That's the most restrictive tier in which we have widespread community transmission of disease. What's notable this time, and you can see on the chart of the cases that we have had in the last two weeks, that the rate of rise in our jurisdiction is quite sharp. Statewide, also, this is different than the last rise in July, where in a week's time, the case rate went up by 1/3. This time in the state of California, and also you can see nationally, that rate of rise of new cases is much more dramatic in California. In one week's time, we've seen a 50% increase in the number of cases. We also nationally and statewide have seen increases in hospitalization rates and intensive care and we're also seeing increases in deaths.

So it's for these reasons that the governor announced on Monday, that there were going to be some changes to the implementation of the blueprint metrics. It has been part of the state's blueprint for a safer economy, that when necessary, they may need to act more aggressively and this is the stance that the governor took this week on Monday, announcing that those counties that were meeting metrics even

for one week of a more restrictive tier would move back immediately into that tier. And so that became the case for us, moving back from red to purple. This was our second week in metrics of purple. We had been trying to make a case that the previous week was subject to reconsideration. Those reconsiderations became moot and we, effective on Monday, moved back to purple.

The other thing the governor announced in terms of the need for quick action is that the business changes or the sector changes with respect to opening needed to happen within one day rather than the typical allowed three days. So what does this mean for our businesses and our schools? So businesses that have a different capacity limit or indoor versus outdoor need to make that change immediately. What it reflects in terms of outdoor business activities is relevant to restaurants, to fitness facilities, to museums, to movie theaters and also it pertains to places of worship who now need to move their services and activities in these sectors back outdoors.

Fortunately, for personal care services, with all of the licensing and certifications that are in place around health and safety, purple tier... personal care services, excuse me, may remain open indoors with modifications and those pertain to hair services, nail services, skin services, body art. And so those really don't change. What does also change though, with respect to this tier movement, is schools. And with that schools that have not yet begun their process of opening, in any fashion, may not do so now that we're back in the purple tier, with one exception that continues to exist, at the lower ages, we continue to see less disease, less severe disease and less transmission. And so with that, we are still available to receive elementary school waiver requests for Grades K through six to open even while in the purple tier, as long as they submit a plan that is in accordance with state guidelines for schools and that everything is done with all the protective measures in place.

We understand that these changes are very difficult for our community. We understand that businesses can't always turn on a dime. With that, we have stated to our businesses, those who have asked, I've said so yesterday at our board meeting that though these changes need to be implemented as soon as possible, we are not going to take enforcement action this week but we are working with our businesses to ensure that they move as quickly as they can to make these changes.

The other thing I wanted to address again is Cal Poly numbers. I continue to get a lot of email and concern about this is all due to Cal Poly, and I want to remind folks

that that is not the case. It is absolutely true that Cal Poly continues to see high numbers amongst their student body. And those numbers are part of the reason that we are regressing, but we have actually run the numbers and found that even without the Cal Poly cases, we would be reverting to purple because our case rates are that high. This is particularly so in North County, but other parts of the County as well.

So that said we continue to work with Cal Poly administration. They are still ramping up their testing, doing more screening testing of their student body. We are issuing isolation and quarantine orders. There are now hundreds and hundreds of students on quarantine. And we also, for those who are not on quarantine, along with the university administration, are encouraging those on campus or even off campus who are planning to go home for the holiday that they do so sooner, rather than later. We recommend that they get a test to make sure that they are not bringing disease home to their potentially higher risk families. But we want to begin to evacuate in a sense, the campus as soon as possible by this Friday, with the exception of those students who need to complete their isolation period, or for those students who are in family situations where they don't have somewhere to go to.

For the most part, the campus is going to be closed as of this Friday. Students will be continuing their semester through virtual learning. And the health and wellness center on campus will still be open and available to students for testing or for consultation. So how do we get back into the red tier? That's obviously our most pressing goal and we know that we've done it before, we know we can do it again. We continue to be lucky that even in purple, we don't have an awful lot of severe disease and that's a good thing. We continue to watch those numbers most closely.

But we continue to send the same messaging that I've been standing up here week after week of there are ways that we can drive down community transmission if we all comply with the recommendations of consistent face covering use. The state actually has now issued an update on that face covering guidance and so everyone should look at that. It's actually more by exception at this point, we should all be wearing masks, indoors or outdoors when around any people, even during food and beverage intake. During the actual moment that you are eating or drinking, you may take your mask off obviously but it doesn't mean you come for a two hour meal at a restaurant and as soon as you show up to put your name on the list, you

take your mask off and you go through the evening without it. So those are some of the kinds of ways that we can progress.

We know there's a huge temptation for people to celebrate and to travel particularly around Thanksgiving and certainly December holidays as well. And so we have put out guidance toward that end that is available on our website, but in general the same messages that we've been saying, which is avoid gatherings of more than three households, avoid non-essential travel and stay close to home as much as possible. It also, if you have aging or ill family members, it is not a good idea to get together with them. I know many people want to bring their elderly family members home for the holidays from residential facilities, where they may be living, again we would encourage folks during this time, especially during the heightened community transmission we're seeing, to find other ways to connect with those family members rather than bringing them into a family gathering indoors for a Thanksgiving meal with many people present or with different family members from different parts of the country even

As I mentioned, that testing is recommended if you are gonna be traveling, especially traveling some distance or traveling on conveyances that present greater risk, air travel, bus, rail travel. However, I do need to mention that we are seeing a little a lot of demand on our testing system and that is contributing to it. And so we are asking that those people who are testing just for purposes of travel, who do not have symptoms, who do not have a known exposure, do your testing through a self swab that you can order and still have time to receive in the next couple of days and get your result prior to travel next week. We are, as I said, we're seeing a lot of backlog and people trying to get appointments at our community testing sites. And in some cases it's not until next week that people can get appointments. So we really want to reserve those spots for the people who are sick with the disease, or have a known exposure to someone who's positive. Information about getting these self swab kits is available on our website, either readyslo.org, and you can search for testing or go directly to emergencyslo.org/testing.

So what are the things that we can do? In coming together and gatherings, I'm gonna introduce a new term for you. We want you to celebrate like a BOSS. So keep your social gatherings: B, brief; O, outside; S, small and S, symptom-free. So if you could take away one thing today is knowing that many people are still going to get and come together in some fashion, with mixed families celebrating Thanksgiving

or the forthcoming additional holidays in December. Celebrate like a BOSS. Keep it brief, outside, small and symptom-free.

And lastly, I want to talk about the vaccine that is on the horizon. As you know, or may have heard, there are two products now that are planning to submit very soon for FDA approval for an emergency use authorization. Both vaccines appear to be very effective but it will take quite some time for us to get a volume of vaccine that will serve our entire population. So in the meantime, we are beginning to work with what that first phase of vaccination will look like in our county. We have started to dialogue with our hospital partners. It is our hospital health care workers who are likely to be the first recipients of the small amount of vaccine that we may receive as early as next month.

We have begun to prepare locally for our own receipt as the local health department by obtaining the appropriate deep freezers. And we have enrolled and also encouraged our hospitals and also our skilled nursing facilities to enroll in the state system that is accepting provider sign-up for receipt of vaccinations. So those things are moving forward and we also plan in the near term to have a broader stakeholder group related to the important decision making that's going to be necessary about how we triage, what will be insufficient amounts of vaccine for those who want it. I know we've heard that there are many people in the community, in the state, in the country who are skeptical about vaccine but even so we want to get to a place where a significant majority will take the vaccine and a significant proportion do want to and in that we will not have enough at the get-go. We're gonna be doing this important work with our stakeholders at helping determine what a prioritization scheme looks like in our county. So stay tuned on that. And with that, I am open for questions

- [Audience Member] Dr. Borenstein, a question for you regarding some of the guidance that you had mentioned. There's been a couple of high profile incidents with state leaders, our governor at a publicized dinner for assemblymen on a trip to Hawaii including our local assemblyman. As a public health officer, how difficult is that making your job to convey your message, to adhere to these safety measures when the public sees our political leaders, some would say flaunting those safety guidelines?

- So I appreciate that our governor spoke to the public directly and apologized for what he called a very bad decision. I think that's important to note and to also recognize that we're all human. And I think that he probably won't do it again. I

think that they... I had a quite frankly personally, a little harder time of a pre-conceived meeting in another state. It's one thing if people are traveling to visit older, potentially ill relatives and potentially for the last time and making those difficult decisions about when and where to travel and for how long and how to do so. Yeah, I think that was a bad call on the part of those legislators. And I think bringing these things to light will help us all be reminded on an ongoing basis that we have to live what we preach.

- [Audience Member] Another question for you regarding testing. You said the demand right now is quite high as we can understand, what are you seeing in terms of results getting back? Is that delaying results and how has that been impacted?

- So last week were seeing slower results and impart it was a double whammy, if you will, of demand as well as the state transition to the state laboratory. We were seeing some hiccups with that. Our turnaround time is back down to what we would expect, less than two days in most cases. So we're happy with that.

- [Crowd Member] Dr. Borenstein, how will enforcement be differences this time in the purple tier? On businesses and on gatherings, will there be more enforcement for home gatherings?

- So we have always said we... both because of manpower and it's a pretty atypical thing to go around door to door in general neighborhoods to see if people are having gatherings. That said, I know that the San Louis Obispo City Police Department in conjunction with Cal Poly has actually been doing that sort of thing when they hear word of a party or they hear the party, they are absolutely intervening. They have issued a lot of citations. So it is quite difficult to impact that most risky of behaviors of indoor gatherings where they can't necessarily be seen or heard. When we learn about them, we will reach out to an enforcement entity. Sometimes it's after the fact, and we try to educate or issue statements that the next time there might be a forthcoming citation. With our businesses, we always take the first approach of trying to educate. It's why we're giving our businesses a little bit more time to comply, but we have issued cease and desist orders. We know that many of the cities have issued administrative citations. We will continue to look at that as the situation worsens and as compliance worsens, we're prepared to take additional actions as necessary.

- [Crowd Member] And is there a possibility that the county would re-implement a shelter at home order or that retail would have to shut down indoor services?

- Yeah, so we have been taking our... We've been making our decision on the basis of what the state is doing. We have in fact, asked the state to consider that our metrics are better than everyone around us. We know that that doesn't put us out of harm's way, that maybe this time we will start to see heightened hospitalizations and such. I don't think in this county nor as you, if you hear the governor even this week saying they're not looking at that type of shutdown in the future. Everything is open for consideration as things potentially get to a place where we need to have more dramatic actions.

- [Audience Member] And just to follow up to the question Dave Ally asked about the governor and Jordan Cunningham's behavior, A motion you anyone would like to know, what do you think about Cunningham's claims that Newsom's policies are unscientific?

- So I have communication every week with people who I very much respect, their intellect, their experience, their scientific training, epidemiologists, physicians, public health leaders. And I believe that they are doing their best at the state level to make decisions based on science

- [Crowd Member] Dr. Borenstein, The Central Coast Medical Association named you Obispo County Physician of the Year. How do you feel about that?

- The question was I was named the Physician of the Year for 2020 as I joked with them when I got the phone call is while you sorta had to. So I am grateful. I'm honored, I'm humbled. And I share that award with my entire public health team. I continue to be the face of this, but there are dozens of people who are standing behind me or with me in really trying to manage this disease, which is historic. And it's not only me, it's all the physicians who have been working overtime, especially in our higher acuity settings like hospitals or urgent cares and just seeing lots of patients struggling with this disease. So I I'm honored and thank you for that.

- [Audience Member] I've got another question for you and congratulations on that award. Dr. Borenstein, 65 cases on average over the last couple of weeks, 700 cases. I mean, as we pointed out, numbers are going up how difficult is this gonna be to get back into the red tier? And as you stated, essentially, I mean, it's up to everyone to really do their part but when you start looking at numbers, I mean, it seems like it's gonna be hard.

- Yeah, it stands to reason the higher the curve goes, the longer it will take to come down the other side, but I do believe we can do it. I understand that there is a lot of

fatigue and disappointment at having to either continue or double down on all the protective measures. But we do. That's 250,000 dead Americans and third leading cause of death approaching some of the higher causes of death in this country. It is what it is. The virus is our enemy, not each other.

- [Crowd Member] Anything else?

- Thank you.

- Thank you again for being here today. You can still get all of our counties COVID-19 information on readyslo.org or by calling the Phone Assistance Center or the Public Health information line. Next week, we have a few changes to our testing schedule. Our Arroyo Grande testing site will be open through the remainder of this week, but will close on Friday at 7:00 PM. On Monday, the 23rd, that location will move to Grover Beach back to the Ramona Garden Park Center. Also next week, all four of our community testing sites will be closed on Thanksgiving day, but will reopen on Friday, November 27th. Because of the Thanksgiving Day closure, testing will be offered on Saturday the 28th at not only our Paso Robles site but also at our San Louis Obispo and Grover Beach sites. All the information and appointments will be updated and available at readyslo.org.

Also as Dr. Borenstein mentioned, if you are asymptomatic and have not been exposed to someone with COVID, please consider taking a self swab test available via in-home test kit. This will help improve availability for testing appointments for those who are symptomatic or might need a test urgently. We encourage you to continue to watch these briefings online at keyt.com and ksby.com or on TV live on cable Channel 13. Shortly after each briefing, we will also post these videos on our San Louis Obispo County Facebook page, on our public health Facebook page and on our county's YouTube channel. They will also continue to be rebroadcast on Public Access Channel 21 at 8:00 AM, 5:00 PM and midnight daily until the next briefing occurs. That next briefing will be next Wednesday at 3:15, here again, thank you for staying informed and be well and we'll see you next week.