

- The delay in getting started. My name is Michelle Shoresman, and today is Wednesday, March 10th, 2021. Thank you for watching today's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon, we will hear from San Luis Obispo County Public Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein, County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director, Wade Horton is also here and available to take your questions. Thank you once again to Robin Babb, our American sign language interpreter. And now, I'll introduce County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Good afternoon, everyone, here for our weekly COVID updates. So let me start with some numbers. Fortunately, we do continue to see a decline. We are nowhere near our peak. Today we have 19,966 cases confirmed in our county. Our active infection rate keeps coming down. We have 280, so very good news. Even our hospitalizations are the lowest we've seen in a while at a total of 15, with five individuals in the intensive care unit. We do have 248 deaths. Unfortunately, this is an increase of 10 from last week. So we have not seen that really fall off dramatically. We'd like to, I know every time I talk about this, we're talking in numbers but our condolences go out to 10 individuals who died in our community from a disease that is now very preventable.

So I continue to ask people to do everything they can to continue to take precautions and keep disease away from especially the most vulnerable, but as all of us get ready for the next holiday that is coming up, St. Patrick's Day, I hope that we will all remember the types of surges that we've seen with each holiday beginning with Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas time, New Year's Eve, every one of those holidays has led to a surge. And so, I am asking of our community that we remember what happens even though we are moving toward herd immunity. We are not there. So please take precautions at this holiday. We do not want to see us backslide because of one night worth of gathering and great numbers or partying. So celebrate like a boss, brief, outside, small and symptom-free. We are making great progress. So please help us stay there.

I do wanna spend a little bit of time today talking about something that has been getting more attention both in the public sphere and in the medical literature, especially it's something that we haven't talked about much but as I'm hearing more from friends and family about experiences with this, and I've read in the medical literature about long COVID or long haulers, I thought it bears mentioning. There's a lot of people who have gotten through this disease, many young, healthy people, the vast majority of them without incident. And so, there's generally a

public perception that if you're young and healthy, you need not be particularly concerned about this disease. But more and more, we are learning that even among people who had very mild disease or even no disease at all at the time of their initial infection may go on to have symptoms that are persisting, and persisting for months, in some cases a year.

And so, we really need to recognize that this disease, again, I've said many times is not the flu. It is a wily virus and it has killed many, but in addition to that, it has really impacted the livelihoods and the wellbeing of a fair number of people. The medical research that I've been seeing of late, there was a recent JAMA article, had the incidents of this long COVID as high as one in three individuals. State of California just did a study and also had it at about one in four individuals. So these are younger, healthy people who nothing very dramatic but definitely implications on their sense of health and wellbeing. It could be respiratory problems, but most commonly we're seeing fatigue, ongoing loss of sense of smell and taste, what some call brain fog or confusion at a mild level, but to the point that people can notice changes, and also mood changes, is something that we're seeing. So I just wanted to share that with the public, not to scare you, not to overstate what's going on, but to make sure that people continue to recognize that this particular virus is not your run of the mill cold. It is not the flu. It has implications for people who are at risk for really bad outcomes, but it also has implications for ongoing health impacts to even younger and healthy people.

So with that, and I just want to take one more occasion to say, because I'm seeing an awful lot of activity. I'm seeing it in the community, I'm hearing it from friends and coworkers about lots of people coming together in large numbers, centers for disease control put out information about how people who have now been fully vaccinated may come together. Those are limited still at this time to fellow vaccinated people in a private home with limited numbers may indeed gather without masks. This is not going out and about in the community or coming together with large numbers of people. We will get there. We're not that far off. So please stay the course. We are still seeing a high number of cases compared to when we had nothing in March, April, May. So we are not out of the woods. We're seeing variants. Please just hang in there for a while longer and continue to use all the protective measures that we continue to recommend, and we really will put this pandemic behind us in a relatively short period of time. Our best tool for that is vaccinations.

So let me tell you again where we are with that. Last week alone, your local county health department immunized over 10,000 people. This was a great milestone for us. We have across the entire county, public health included, vaccinated over 82,000 individuals in our county or doses administered. I'm sorry. So the number of people is a fair bit less, but we are making great progress. About three quarters of all of those doses are taking place through our public health mass vaccination sites. Again, we have Paso Robles, SLO, and Arroyo Grande, but we are seeing more and more vaccination opportunities in the community, especially through pharmacies. Initially, we had just two locations in South County. We had one CVS and one Rite Aid, both in Arroyo Grande. The federal distribution now has named forthcoming in additional dozen pharmacies that will be getting direct dose shipments from the federal allocation. And we, ourselves, in public health still have on top of that another several pharmacies that we are distributing some of our doses to. So again, we have over 36,000 people in our county who have received at least a first dose, a good number of them, over 20,000, have been fully vaccinated and many more coming this week, as well as ongoing weeks. So what we are seeing with respect to the demand as did happen with our first opening to healthcare workers and then subsequently to people above the age of 75, now we have been focusing on the age group of 65 plus. We have seen a drop in the demand for the vaccine. We know that we've gotten through about half or more of that sector. We are still open and very much recommending the safe and effective vaccines for people who have not yet taken the opportunity in those groups. But we want to use every dose we have as quickly as we can.

So with that demand falling down somewhat, we are now ready to open for more groups for vaccine eligibility through the county system. This is also starting to happen in the community pharmacies. So we're going to match where the state's phase 1B, tier one would have us. And we are now ready to completely open eligibility to those workforce sectors that include education and childcare. It includes food and agriculture, it includes emergency services. And we also want to make clear we have been hesitant as we required more documentation in the healthcare sector for unpaid caregivers or family caregivers of highly vulnerable persons. We haven't had a really good way to seek documentation for those individuals. We are asking now that those persons who take care of someone in their home, via a family member or an unpaid caregiver without a paycheck to show for it that they too can now register for a dose by way of self attestation. So

full information on who is within these sectors is available at [recoverSLO.org/vaccine](https://recoverSLO.org/vaccine).

You may have to make a couple of clicks to look at each individual sector and self identify if you meet the criteria of falling into that particular sector. In addition to these sectors, we are, as has been promulgated at the state level to move forward with making vaccine available to individuals of any age, 16 and above, the vaccine products are only licensed at that age so far. So anyone 16 to 64, who would otherwise not be eligible by virtue of age, obviously, or employment who have certain healthcare conditions or are medically vulnerable by virtue of disability may now also make an appointment through the registration process. So just to give you some idea, the list of high-risk medical diagnosis is my medical diagnosis is actually fairly narrow but will apply to quite a few people in our community. So it is those with cancer who are undergoing treatment or have debilitating conditions. It is people in severe stages of kidney disease, those with chronic pulmonary disease who require oxygen, individuals with down syndrome, sickle cell anemia, and there are several more. And all of that information is also available at [recoverSLO.org/vaccine](https://recoverSLO.org/vaccine).

You can see what the full list of medical diagnoses are. Also for high-risk individuals by virtue of disability, those individuals can register for an appointment, and we're working with some of the agencies like Tri County's regional center to help provide documentation. But for some of the groups, they will not have that documentation. We are looking for self attestation. So how do you go about getting an appointment? We are continuing with our registration process. That means you have to register in our system just one time. Most people can do this online, again, through that same website, [recoverSLO.org/vaccine](https://recoverSLO.org/vaccine). We also can help people who don't have access to the computer, register themselves as eligible through our phone assistance center. That number is 805-543-2444. Once you do register for an appointment, you're done. You only need to register one time. You will get confirmation that you have been added to the system, and on a regular basis as vaccine becomes available to us, we will randomly select from the pool of people who have registered in advance of the next appointment selection according to the number of doses that we have available. Each time we do that, we will notify people that they either have or have not been selected in that particular week. So our intention is to pull from the registry one time per week unless we have some

unusual circumstances of getting more vaccine that we didn't see forthcoming that has happened on a couple of occasions.

But for the most part, we will pull from our registry. One time we will notify people that they have been given an appointment. We will give them that appointment, date, and time on the basis of during the registration process, people telling us what their preferred dates and time of day is. Obviously, the more flexible one can be with that appointment availability on your end will make our jobs easier, but nonetheless, we will try to accommodate people to the best of our ability to meet their needs in terms of date and time. For those who don't get selected, you also will get communication back via email or if we have an email. If you don't receive confirmation one way or the other, then please again, feel free to call the phone assistance center to find out if indeed your registration is with us.

So just to understand that with this broad opening that we're announcing today, we imagine that, that might count as many as 40,000 people in our county. We've had those kinds of numbers before. We know the first one, two, even three weeks of opening to a new group of individuals may make it very challenging to get an appointment, but we will get through that group. So please be patient and understand while you might not get it immediately. When you're in our system, you can expect to be immunized in the very near term within a matter of weeks.

And lastly, I wanna talk about new state guidance and where we are in the blueprint. So last week, the California Department of Public Health announced a couple of new areas of guidance that will become effective on April 1st that pertains to outdoor sports and live performances. As of April 1st, those activities may occur in all tiers, inclusive of purple. We are in red. What that will allow us to do is have a slightly greater capacity or audience. In all tiers, advanced reservations are gonna be necessary. Limited sales, ticket sales will be possible and concession sales will not be in the usual way where you go up and purchase your food at either intermission or at any point during a game that you may be watching. But nonetheless, at the level that we're at, we'll be able to have some tickets available for participation in live performances and/or sport, outdoor sporting events.

The other state guidance that has been released pertains to amusement parks. We don't have any that fit that bill in our county, but certainly not too far from us. And so, the opening of those parks will be based on what the status is in the county where that park resides. It will only be possible for counties that are in the red tier or better. And when they do open, there will be very limited capacity. So at the red

tier level, only 15% of normal capacity of an amusement park will be in place. And as we move through the less restrictive tiers, that the carrying capacity, if you will, for attendance at an amusement park will go up. So lastly, with respect to where we are on the tiers, I have said that we are in red. We continue to be in red and we continue to see better metrics. So this week, we're down to 5.7, is our adjusted case rate for total number of cases per 100,000 population is at 5.7. Our testing rates are actually quite low. And in fact, in the yellow tier for our overall county-wide testing positivity rate is 1.9%, so that puts us in the yellow tier. Our health equity, which allows for a 10% differential is at 2.1%. So on both of those factors, we are were actually meeting yellow tier. So that means we're on our way toward orange. If we continue to do all the hard work that I talk about week after week, we will make great progress. We have to remain in the red tier for a minimum of three weeks. But if we continue to see the kind of progress that we have been seeing, we may be able to get to that orange tier in a relatively short period of time. And with that, I'm available for questions.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein , just to clarify real quick, the new eligibility groups, as you said, those with certain healthcare conditions, disabilities, there's that food and Ag, that's new, right? And then the caregivers as well?

- Yes.

-[Man] Am I missing anyone?

- So our education and childcare sector, we had already opened up last week. Within each of those sectors, we had done smaller groupings. So we were taking care of SLO law enforcement officers and emergency services. K through 12 and childcare, we were allocating at least 10% of our doses. Institutions of higher education, we gave a very limited number of doses. So even within the education and childcare sector, we're now allowing everyone in that sector to register for the opportunity for a vaccine. What we were able to do just last week and this week in the K through 12 sector as well as the fact that there are now other entities providing vaccine to that sector, we think we have made great headway in that sector. But anyone who hasn't yet had the opportunity can now enroll in this registry.

- [Man] Got it. And then how many doses roughly is the county expecting next week?

- Yeah, so we're looking at having a total of about 11,000 doses next week, but about half of those will be second doses that are due. So 5,500 is what we're looking at for first dose appointments.

- [Man] Another question for you, you hit on the testing rates. What are you seeing in terms of testing demand? Is that going down as the vaccines have been wrapping up and people, you know, the numbers are going down. So what are you seeing in terms of tests being performed here in the county?

- Yes, we are indeed, as it's true everywhere, seeing decreased testing rates. We continue to encourage people who think they may have been exposed or having any symptoms. We still have our robust testing opportunities community-wide. We are seeing our adjustment factor lesson because we're seeing less testing, because there's less disease. So to some extent that is unavoidable but we also don't want people to forego testing because they think COVID is over.

- [Woman] Dr. Borenstein, can you explain who is eligible to get the vaccine at a pharmacy? Because I think that's a little different than who's eligible to get at a county site, for instance, like, I don't know if vets are able to get at county sites, but if they go to a pharmacy, they may be eligible. There may be some state tiers that are not available at county sites.

- We've been in communication with the local pharmacies who are getting direct doses and they're partnering with us very well about trying to match where we're at. And so, especially now as we open next week to all these sectors, they've gotten a little bit ahead of us with respect to some of the sectors I mentioned, but we knew that this was likely to come. And so we didn't try to, nor could we. Their doses are coming from the federal government who have somewhat different rules, but I think we're very well aligned. On the issue of veterinarians, I know that has been an ongoing question. And now the state has made it clear, they are included in this phase 1B, so under food and agriculture as well as to some extent under emergency services. So we will be able to accommodate those individuals as well.

- [Woman] Okay, I asked because I know we've heard from readers who are leaving the county and like going to Bakersfield because they can get a vaccine there but we're not all eligible here.

- Yeah, we've been hearing that for many weeks that people do go out of the county where the rules or the restrictions may be different or they're not following the state guidance, but we've been trying to tell people, please don't do that if you

expect to come back to us for the second dose. Our second doses allotment is based on the number of first doses we've given. As we now get to a place where we can even the playing field, so to speak, hopefully, we'll see less of that.

- [Woman] And can you share, I know earlier, I think it was last week, the governor mentioned separating a 40% allocation for specific census tracks. Can you talk about how that's gonna occur here?

- Right, so the governor has indicated that starting this week 40% of the state allocation will go to the counties that inhabit the lowest quartile of the healthy places index. Our county does not, both fortunately and unfortunately in this case, does not have any zip codes that meet that criteria. So we, in fact, may be seeing lower allocation moving forward. On the other hand, there's good news with a third product. So Johnson vaccine, we did get a small amount of it. It is on pause for reasons that I am not clear on at the federal level for two weeks, having nothing to do with safety, but just where it's being allocated to. In two weeks time, I hope that we will see our allocation go up because there's now an additional vaccine available from that third product.

- [Man] I have one question for Wade. Here we are about a year into the end of the process, almost exactly, and if you could update us on the county financials where they're at.

- Well, we still have a \$14.6 million budget gap to close that we're working with the board of supervisors on a strategy on how to close that. And certainly, the fact that we are receiving state and federal funds and then the stimulus package that we just got word today did pass the house. That will bring substantial dollars to the county. And we'll be working with the board on how we can best allocate that for the betterment of the community.

- [Woman] Any other questions?

- Thank you.

- [Man] One more quick question for Dr. Borenstein, just to circle back onto my first question. And again, to clarify, so the education workers, they were having their vaccination appointments through the office of education. Now they can register through the county? Is that right? Or are they-

- Yes, correct. So we had set aside a set number of doses that we allocated through the county office of education and the childcare planning council for those entities

to make appointments on a priority basis now that we've gotten through much of the demand, the remainder of individuals who want a dose can do so by registering through us.

- [Man] So is the office of education continuing on or now it's just an-

- No, as of next week, they're turning that function back over to us.

- [Man] Thanks.

- Thanks.

- Thank you all once again for being here today. Just a few reminders. ReadySLO.org remains your main source of online information about the county's response to COVID-19 and recoverSLO.org/vaccine remains the best place to go for information about vaccine, including answers to frequently asked questions on our FAQ page. Our phone assistance center remains open seven days a week from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. And our recorded public health information line remains available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you are currently eligible for vaccine, please go to our vaccine registry page at recoverSLO.org/vaccine and sign up for the opportunity to be vaccinated as early as next week. As Dr. Borenstein mentioned, you will not need to check back once you have registered, you only need to register once and you'll receive updates after that. If you do not have access to a computer or the internet, you can call our phone assistance center and they will help you sign up. Testing remains an important tool for helping fight this disease. We continue to offer free COVID-19 testing at several locations around the County. If you would like to make an appointment at one of those locations, you can go to emergencySLO.org/testing for links as well as those locations. We'll also take walk-ins at this time. You can watch these briefings live on the county's YouTube channel, and they are frequently live-streamed on KSBY and KEYT's websites. They are also rebroadcast on SLO County Public Health's Facebook page, as well as Public Access Channel 21 at 8:00 a.m., 5:00 p.m. and midnight until the next briefing occurs. Thank you once again for staying informed. Be well, and we will see you here next Wednesday the 17th at 3:15 p.m.