

- Good afternoon. My name is Michelle Shoresman and today is Wednesday, March 24th, 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 Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein, County Administrative Officer and Emergency Services Director. Mr. Wade Horton is also here and available to take your questions. Thank you to our American Sign Language interpreter Robin Babb, and now County Health Officer Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you, good afternoon. So as always, I'm gonna start with where we are in our COVID metrics, the numbers as you can see on the slide, we have flattened out, but we have not really seen more of a decrease, but our case numbers are trickling they're not super high, they're not super low. We currently have 216 active cases. And in total to date, we have 20,309 cases here in SLO County. This level that we're seeing is about where we were in November, but we really wanna drive it down even further. Our hospitalizations remain in the single digits. We have nine persons in the hospital, three are in intensive care and I'm very pleased to report that for more than a week now we have not added any fatalities from this disease to our accounts. So, we stand at 253 too high in number but at least at this point in time for the last seven, eight, nine days, we have not added any.

So, our blueprint metrics where we are in the tiers, we remain in red. This is three weeks now and we are just barely in red. At this point we're at 7.0 well let me say we would have been barely in red but for a change in the metrics, which I will talk about. But as you recall, we've for over many months talked about the cutoff for being in the purple tier, is your case count? Your adjusted case count has to be below seven new cases per 100,000 population per day, and we, this week are at 7.0. However, there has been a change in the state metrics that's associated with the amount of vaccine that has been administered particularly in the lowest quartile the at-risk vulnerable populations or healthy places index. So, with that, when the State of California met their goal of 2 million doses administered to folks in those higher risk settings, we have now seen that the red tier allows for an adjusted case rate up to 10 cases per 100,000 population per day. So, our adjusted case rate at seven puts us firmly in red but it is a small uptake and we've been seeing that small uptake for a couple of weeks.

Our test positivity rates which are the other factors that are looked at overall for the County is in good shape at 2.5% firmly in orange and for our health equity, our lowest quartile is at 4.2%. So, we are in orange for our testing rate our test positivity

we're in red for our adjusted case rate. And part of the uptake in that case rate is because we are seeing less of an adjustment. We are seeing a decrease in testing. The same is true statewide so the metric against which we are measured at the state level it has gone down, but ours has gone down quite a bit as well our testing volume and therefore we are not getting that same robust adjustment. So, our unadjusted case rate at eight really is not that much of an adjustment down to seven.

So, as I always say to people who ask, what's it gonna take for us to get past all of this? We'll talk about vaccines, but still, we are seeing cases, we are seeing people in the hospital, we do not want to see another surge, so the same message remains true at this time for a while longer, we need to continue with all of our preventive measures of mass squaring and distancing and staying home when you're sick and hand-washing et cetera. So, with respect to vaccinations, as I've said for many weeks now, this is our ticket to success.

We have in the County overall had over 111,000 doses have been administered. What you see in front of you is what public health has received and been able to administer. So just over 87,000 doses of vaccine of various types have come to the Public Health Department, and over 78,000 of those have been administered, this is as of last Friday. So, we get those vaccines in and we get them out just as quickly within the week we're never holding more than 10% dose, and that's for the week that we're in. So, we are seeing that public health is administering proportionately less of the doses because fortunately we're seeing many additional providers come online. So, we see here of that 78,000 that public health has done 48,000 of those are first dose, 30,000 or second dose. So, for the Public Health Department, 60 some odd percent have been fully vaccinated among those who got their first dose with us. And then subsequently their second dose.

Our provider community is a little bit later, so they're starting to get more and more first doses in. So, we don't have quite that same rate of fully vaccinated across all of the doses in our county, but much progress is being made. So, with that we have seen a lesson demand signal for our public health clinics, our three large clinics North County in Paso, Central County at Cuesta College South County at the South County Regional Center in Arroyo Grande we are continuing to do over 10,000 doses a week, 11,000 last week we're on schedule this week to do the same amount. We're not hitting our ultimate 15,000 target. And that's okay because those doses are still being administered. They're being administered elsewhere. I

wanna thank our pharmacy partners, healthcare providers, Community Health Centers of the Central Coast who are picking up some of those dose allocations and running with them. But our demand has dropped somewhat.

And with that, as you may know, by now we've been able this week to open our registry to a new large population. So, persons of ages, 50 to 64 who were not otherwise eligible by virtue of their employment or medical condition. Now everyone in that age group is eligible to sign up through the County process to make their desire known to get a dose, to sign up through our registry. And we will be making roughly 9000 first dose appointments available next week for those individuals, we have had nearly as many already sign up as there are appointments available but we're giving it a little bit more time before we make our selections for who can actually get those doses next week. So, we very much invite people to register for an appointment. We think that we're seeing a falloff in demand for a number of reasons. One I've spoken about, which is there are more options more places that people can go. But we also think that there's somewhat of a sense of ah I don't have to do it right now and there's not the same crush that we were seeing early on. We're not seeing the same amount of disease.

And so, I wanna caution our public that really, we're only going to be able to dispense with the masks and visit with all our friends and go to concerts when we get to that place of herd immunity. So, herd immunity again, means we have to have 75, 80, 85% of our population fully protected, ideally through vaccination rather than risk getting the disease. So, we still have quite a ways to go. You can see on the chart that I've put up here is to give people an idea of where we are in our vaccination by age group. So even among the highest risk individuals for whom we opened the vaccine process early on aged 75, and over this is through state immunization registry real time data. Only 55% of that group has yet been vaccinated and this is partially or fully vaccinated. So, we again recommend people complete their series with the second dose. And for those who haven't started, there's another 45% of the population that we would like to see vaccinated in that highest risk group. Almost half of the age group 65 to 74 have yet to even start the vaccination process. They are eligible now we have appointments available and we would welcome everyone to make an appointment. When we moved down to the age group that we've just opened up for and we haven't started to take into our clinics we will do so next week. But so far 18% of that age group 50 to 64 have been either partially or fully vaccinated. And these would-be individuals who meet certain

workforce criteria or medical or disabling conditions. And it goes down from there. So, every one of these bars we ultimately wanna see not a 50%, not a 55%, not a 20%. We wanna see 80 plus percent. So, we have a long way to go as a community. We're getting doses in, we have capacity. So please register to get your vaccine. I know people may be early on felt like it was a no-win situation trying to get an appointment. We're not in that same place anymore. We have the means to accommodate most people who are interested in getting a dose.

So, with that, we've started to look at what comes next. If we continue to not see the demand that we would like after we tackle this now people over the age of 50 and all the other preexisting eligible populations such as healthcare workers the education sector, emergency services food and Ag recently added also transit workers informal and unpaid caregivers congregate living situations. So, in-corrections or those persons experiencing homelessness either sheltered or unsheltered. And then again, as I've mentioned those with high-risk conditions, their remains then basically age 16 to 49. And we will begin to move into those sectors as the demand allows. But since we've just opened to the age of 50, we're gonna need a little bit more time to see how that plays out in the next week or so. But we did meet with our task force today. We had these kinds of conversations. We've talked a lot about having our task force as they have done to continue to help us with messaging to do outreach, to do in reach, especially into hard-to-reach populations so that we can bump those percentages of vaccinated populations up. The one group that the task force did decide to add today as part of our currently eligible is anyone affiliated with the judiciary system. So, I think the last time we talked about adding judges those in the court system, public defender DA we've now also decided to add anyone associated with the court system. So, bailiff victim witness, as well as jurors. So, jurors who receive a summons can use that summons as their means of eligibility to make an appointment and to get their vaccinations so that they will be protected if and when they actually are seated in a jury.

I do, we have heard from some people who say, well I've been waiting in the system for a little while and I haven't yet been able to get an appointment that mostly happens at this moment in time for people who have had to be restrictive in what days, or what site that they can get their vaccine. So, we have experienced more demand in central part of the County. Our slow site fills up routinely before the other sites. And when we hit our maximum capacity there, unfortunately for people that say they can only come to that site we have to hold off on their appointment

until the following week. We will prioritize those people when we do have more appointments open. But if you can be more flexible in where you can go for your vaccine or make open to any time of day or any day of the week that will help your chances in getting a vaccine within the week of your registration. As we're opening it up there may be people who will have to wait longer because our plan at this point is to select people for appointments, with an eye still on risk factors. So, as we open up and move through additional age categories, we are still going to give at... We've decided with the task force today, that our process for giving people appointments will not only be how long you've been in the registry system but what your risk factors are. So even if an 80-year-old decides for the first time today that they are ready now to get into the registry they will be selected for an appointment before a 50-year-old, who applies for the first time. I also to help get more people covered. We do ask of employers that they allow their employees to use sick time to go get vaccinated. We also ask for consideration that for those who do have side effects most do not, but for those who have side effects that are significant enough for people to feel too ill to come to work that they're also being allowance for that. This is probably the most important medical appointment you can make this year if not in the course of your lifetime. So, we would like to ask of everyone in the community to think long and hard about your state of readiness, to ask our employers to support their employees, getting vaccine.

And if you have any questions our phone assistance center is available. We continue to put information online and we're going to continue to work with our task force members and all the different sectors in trying to get past some of the hesitancy around this vaccine. One of those groups that had up till now been in term difficult to reach not the group is difficult, difficult to reach in terms of forms information and access to computer and English as a second language has been our farm worker population. So, we had our first dedicated effort to vaccinating farm workers. Just this past Friday, it was a wonderful event. We had more demand than we expected. We vaccinated over 600 people in three hours, and we plan to continue that because of that success we plan to continue that effort week after week I do wanna give a shout out to our collaborators. We could not have done this without them. We had many organizations that were party to this planning and to supporting on the day of the clinic. They include our Farm Bureau, the Promotores Collaborative Herencia Indigena sorry, and many other partners from our Farm Worker Outreach Task Force. As I said, we'll be continuing to provide those. And we are also moving into really trying to turn our efforts to toward those with

challenging access to both the actual pods that we have as well as information. So, we have begun to do home vaccinations. We're partnering with Central Coast Home Health to get vaccines into individuals who are home-bound. We are planning more mobile opportunities especially in higher risk communities and popups in geographically challenging communities where transportation may be an issue. So more to come on that.

And then finally, I wanna end with reminding people with each holiday we have the opportunity to set ourselves back and I ask people to celebrate their Easter holiday with an awareness that we are still at risk for surges based on the fact that we still are seeing 20, 30, 40 cases a day. We are beginning to see variants in this County. So please don't let us slip back. Please use this opportunity to celebrate with your family but in all the ways that we've needed to, unfortunately during this pandemic, which is different from usual years, I hope very much. I expect that we will be able next year to celebrate all our holidays and the ways in which we are accustomed to. But at this time please celebrate like a boss, brief outside, keep it small and symptom-free. And with that, I'm open to questions.

- [Man] Dr. Borenstein real quick, the case rate has gone up the last two weeks a little bit, like you said and you're attributing that to lower testing. If just clarify real quick, what you're attributing those numbers that I've taken because the case rates the numbers seem like they're still fairly low we had been at six today. And you've been in the teens many, many days. So, what's driving that...

- So actually, if testing is down, we would see fewer cases. We're not getting as much of the adjustment factor for having high testing rates. So, our adjusted case rate is slipping up partly because we're not getting that factor of bringing it down by having a higher testing rate. But we are, I think quite frankly, that with the sense of spring is here, lots of people are getting vaccinated. We're in relatively better shape that I am seeing it. I'm seeing less mass wearing, I'm seeing parties. And, we're hearing St Patrick's day had its incidents. So, I just think people need to continue all the good and hard work and unpleasantness of living differently until we get to that herd immunity. We can get there mathematically. We can get there in a matter of a very few number of months. If everyone continues to use all these protective measures gets vaccinated and we'll be on the other side of this pandemic.

- [Man] A question for you, the guidance says we know it seems to change frequently so correct me if I'm wrong on this sports question for you it hits seven for the adjusted case rate, I believe high school athletics certain contact, sports,

football, water polo. I think wrestling too will have to undergo testing. Is that accurate do you know?

- Yeah so, it's football, water polo and rugby wrestling which is an indoor sport has to be done under the college guidance, but even the K-12 guidance for youth sports for those three sports because of their risk of high contact. When a County has an adjusted rate of seven or above then weekly testing is a mandate for those sport for the athletes and for their coaches.

- So, there's a lot of football games scheduled for this week. Will those to all the teams in our County here be required to go through testing prior to the kickoff this week.

- They are in fact; on Monday we had that communication with all the superintendents they're planning to do the testing that's required. We have been offering them as much support as is available to us through our community testing sites through other means that they can use to get the testing done. We're seeing turnaround of results in 24 at the outside 48 hours. And so, I believe that all the districts are aware of that and planning to move forward appropriately.

- [Man] That's the question with the variant question. How concerned are you about that? And will there be a booster for any kind of various issues?

- So, at this point there is no discussion. there's no concrete plan for booster doses. The vaccines that we have available seem to still be very highly effective against the variants that we have in this country. There will be probably some modifications to the vaccine as more variants become present in our communities. But we don't think at this time that there is a need for a booster dose but we there's just not enough information because even the earliest vaccinees who were part of clinical trials are still only a number of months out so it will remain to be seen.

- [Man] Okay and then folks who've already been vaccinated what kind of guidance do you got for them about mingling with people interacting with other folks in public?

- Yeah, so this is gonna be rapidly evolving over time as we get more and more people vaccinated, as you saw some of the blueprint metrics are changing as we get more population vaccinated. There's another stage of that change that comes when we get to 4 million doses in the high-risk populations for the time being however vaccines are not a 100% effective in public settings. When there's the opportunity

for lots of people to be together, particularly in indoor settings, still, all of the recommendations are in place for mask wearing for distancing staying home when you're sick obviously. There has been a change however, in terms of if you are fully vaccinated and there has been a known exposure outside of high-risk congregate settings, like nursing homes for instance, individuals who have evidence of having been vaccinated, do not need to quarantine do not need to stay out of the workforce.

- [Man 2] Have you noticed a percentage drop in people not showing up for their vaccinations?

- Oh, so yeah, we are. So, we put out a message, thank you for the opportunity to re message to the community at large that if you are making multiple appointments please cancel the one that you don't use. We were seeing quite a few no-shows at our clinics because as we actually reached back out to people and said, "Hey, can you tell us "why you didn't weren't able to keep your appointment." And quite a lot of them said, "Oh I was able to get it out of pharmacy earlier." So, I very much request of our public that's fine. Take your first opportunity but please give us enough advanced notice cancel and do so at least two to three days out. So, we can fill that spot. We are continuing to see some number of no shows. It's been roughly 10% and we've built into our planning for that allowance. So, we're over booking appointments with an assurance that we are seeing at least that steady sort of 10% no-show rate the best thing. However, is please cancel an appointment if you can't make it.

- [Man 2] And you mentioned this a little earlier but somebody that was in the system already and now that you're expanding the qualification for people to get in, how do the people that were already in their state prioritized to the new people coming in?

- Yeah, so we have a very robust information system for this process. I sure I couldn't do it justice and explaining it. I'm not an IT guru, but we have some of the best minds on being able to pull out of the system based on date of birth, based on the eligibility category that the person selects and we're able to tier people accordingly.

- [Man 2] And is there any concern about people just deciding not to get vaccinated since there are so many people

- Well, yes you heard me speak of that. So, there's a certain part of our population that refuse any vaccine that's unfortunate. I think we're going to live with that with this disease as well. There's another large number of percentage of our population who are waiting to see that the safety data is even more robust than it's been to date with the clinical trials. Now that we've got millions and millions of people in the United States vaccinated hopefully that will help convince people that it is a safe vaccine. And as I said, we're gonna be doing a lot of education and outreach into communities, peer support, so it's not necessarily a government doctor coming into a community, but your neighbor your church goer working with all the different sectors to help message about and show evidence of the safety of this vaccine and the efficacy of the vaccine and why it's important to get it in order. And I keep saying, even if you're not particularly worried about getting the disease, please vaccinate for the sake of your community because you can still spread the disease without symptoms, without any impact on you but you're protecting everyone else. So, the sense of herd immunity is just that we need to move in a population as if we're a herd and protect each other.

- Good.

- Thank you.

- [Kelly] Oh, well here Kelly, I really ask this last question. What I was gonna ask the hesitancy is what have you seen in terms of conversations or estimates? What percentage of the population are people in public health thinking right now just won't take the vaccine?

- There's a whole variety of surveys that have been done, upwards of 40% in some surveys are still saying they're not quite ready to take the vaccine. Those are not when we look at people who say "I will never take the vaccine" that's still much lower percentage, but there's a wide group of people that I don't have a common number, but it's very significant that people are still not quite ready to move forward with this vaccine.

- [Man 3] One last thing for me on, in terms of getting to orange tier were there things you're looking at or hoping will happen or for us to get to that level?

- Simple math see decreased number of cases decreased transmission, follow all the guidelines and we can get there. We've been there before, and we can do it again. All right thank you.

- Thank you all for being here today. A few new announcements today there will be no regular scheduled media briefing next week on Wednesday, March 28th. Instead, our next briefing will occur the following Wednesday April 7th, at 3:15 PM. We will proceed with briefings every other Wednesday after that we will continue to update our website issue news releases and we'll arrange for other news conferences as needed. If we have urgent information to share. You can still get all our counties COVID-19 information on ReadySLO.org and recoverslo.org/vaccine. Our phone assistance center remains open seven days a week from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. 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 sign up for our vaccine registry at recoverslo.org/vaccine for an appointment to get vaccinated as early as next week. The vast majority of registry participants receive an appointment slot within one to two weeks. If you do not have access to a computer or the internet the phone assistance center can also help you sign up for the registry. If you think you may have been exposed or feel symptoms, please get tested at one of several locations around the County. That information is also available at emergencyslo.org/testing. And as Dr. Borenstein said, the results are often available within 24 to 48 hours. You can watch these briefings live on the county's YouTube channel. They are also rebroadcast on SLO County public Health's Facebook page, as well as on cable access channel 21 at 8:00 AM 5:00 PM at midnight each day until the next briefing occurs. Thank you once again for staying informed, be well. And we will see you Wednesday, April 7th at 3:15 PM.