

- Good afternoon. My name is Michelle Shoresman and today is Wednesday, May 5th, 2021. Thank you for watching today's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon we have two speakers for you. We will begin with San Luis Obispo County Behavioral Health director, Anne Robin, and she will be followed by County health officer Dr. Penny Borenstein. Thank you once again to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb. And now San Luis Obispo County Behavioral Health director, Anne Robin.

- Thank you Michelle. I appreciate it. Good afternoon everybody. As Michelle said, I'm Anne Robin. I'd like to inform you that this month is recognized as May is Mental Health Month. This is a month to come together to reduce stigma, build wellness, break down barriers to treatment and strengthen our local community. While every one of us should be mindful of our mental health or wellness, one out of every five Americans will experience a mental health challenge in their lifetime. Taking care of one's mental health has never been more important than during this year-long battle with COVID-19.

Our neighbors and loved ones have experienced isolation, anxiety and depression. Through it, everything, our community has focused on maintaining their physical health. This month we really think that people need to remember to focus on our mental health and wellness. That starts with having conversations about mental wellness, seeking help for ourselves and our loved ones, and supporting those who are working towards their own recovery. Everyone can be a part of mental health awareness. This year, there are many ways to get involved.

We will be hosting a series of community wide events that promote self care, resiliency and recovery. We're offering free mental health first aid trainings to the public. So all community members may learn how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses. On May 21st, Transitions- Mental Health Association will host a mental health resource drive through in San Luis Obispo from 11:30 to 1:30. The drive-through will provide residents with mental health care packages and information on how to receive mental health support. We will also provide mental health care packages at select SLO bank distribution sites in May. The County behavioral health department is also collaborating with the County Office of Education to host a virtual Investing in Youth Mental Health Town Hall on May 13th. Youth who attend will learn about mental health resources that are available to them. For more on events and resources during mental health awareness month, visit [slocounty.ca.gov/MayMentalHealth](https://slocounty.ca.gov/MayMentalHealth) as you'll see on the

screen, and follow our behavioral health, Facebook page and Instagram. Mental health is linked to physical health. That's why we encourage the community to stay informed and also to receive the COVID 19 vaccine.

This vaccine will help us move towards a healthier community, one where people can gather safely and form connections to support each other's mental wellbeing. Many residents are still struggling with emotional challenges from COVID-19. One resource is CalHOPE that offers a call line to talk about struggles and get support from someone who has persevered through tough situations. Call 833-317-HOPE or 317-4673 to receive free support. The central coast hotline is also a tremendous resource for our community. Community members may reach out 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to 800-783-0607. To all our community members struggling with mental illness or mental challenges, whether it be your own or loved ones, we're here for you and please reach out. Thank you. And I'll turn it over to Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Thank you, good afternoon. So thank you Anne for those important comments about mental health month. I'm also here today to start with something non COVID, although it is certainly related to COVID as is mental health, but this coming week, May 6th through 12th is National Nurses Week and I wanted to give my gratitude to all the nurses, public health nurses as well as all of our community nurses, be they in hospitals, long-term care settings, outpatient clinics, everywhere, who have experienced 2020 and 2021 thus far like no other years in their professional careers. And it has been remarkable and we would not be where we are in getting through these extraordinary times of the pandemic without our nurses. So my gratitude really goes out to them. Updating on COVID, the statistics are as follows. So for today, we are at 21,243 cases. We have a very low number of active cases compared to where we've been in recent weeks and months. And I'm very grateful for that, at 124, with only three individuals in the hospital and none in intensive care. So that's a milestone we haven't seen in a little while.

We also are seeing fewer numbers of deaths. We've had two since I last came before you in this forum. And yet that is two more than should happen at this current time when there is a way easily to prevent death, the vaccine is nearly 100% effective against anyone dying from this disease at this point. So I view every death that we've had throughout this pandemic as preventable, but especially now when we have the means in our hands to really have assurances of preventing deaths. So just wanted to keep that in mind, our sincere condolences do go out to these

families that we continue to see with this pandemic, that nationally, if I can just one more time, say as I have throughout this pandemic, is at a level that we only see with the leading causes of death, heart disease and cancer closing in on 600,000 deaths nationally. That's a number that really rivals and exceeds actually the number of cancer cases that we see in a year in the United States of America.

So where we are in this County at this time, our blueprint metrics, we are in orange. We have been in orange now for the second week that we meet that metric. And so that is great news for our community and even more impressive is that our positivity rate actually for the County as a whole is actually in the yellow tier at 1.9%. We just dip into that yellow tier for our test positivity. We're still a little bit off in terms of our health equity quartile at 2.3, but we have gone from a 6.2 adjusted case rate in the last week to 4.9. So we are making progress. However, as I always say, we need to do more. We continue to not see the rate of decline in our cases that we're seeing in many of the counties around us.

So I once again ask of our community to not be premature in thinking that this pandemic is over. There are places in the country, there are certainly places in the world, if you've been listening to any world news India, that still are experiencing grave misfortunes related to this pandemic. So we have the means of getting there, we will get there but we are continuing to need to do due diligence in the short term. With our improved metrics though, statewide and also in this County, we had the opportunity now for a few weeks to do more in the way of gatherings, attending events, private settings, and indoor live performances. So that has been in place since April 15th, all good news. And now there are two new sectors that have been able to open our new state guidance that has come out and those pertain to water parks and also endurance events, running races for the most part, triathlons, marathons, half marathons. So with mitigating factors and all manner of care taken those kinds of events can now be part of activities that our community members engage in. For all of the details about what's allowed, the numbers allowed, how to be safe when you do partake of these activities, all of that information is still available under [emergencyslo.org](https://www.emergencyslo.org) and look for Guidance for Safe Operations.

So I did talk about testing positivity and adjusted case rate. I wanna remind folks that our adjustment comes from the amount of testing that we do. There are still a fair bit of this disease circulating in our community. So people should not be shy about getting tested. Any symptoms related to COVID, please don't just dismiss it as, Oh I think that's my allergies, I'm not feeling great, or they're mild symptoms,

still the best path to getting, one of the best means of getting our diseases controlled is by knowing who is infected. So if you have any symptoms or if you've been in close contact with someone who you know has the disease, please go get tested. We still have four locations that are providing testing on a regular basis, Grover Beach, San Luis Obispo, Paso Robles and Morro Bay. Look again on our website to be sure that you've got the right location on the right day and the time, [emergencyslo.org/testing](https://emergencyslo.org/testing) will give you that information.

With respect to people who have been vaccinated, if you are fully vaccinated and you have had contact with someone with known disease, you no longer need to get tested and also you no longer need to quarantine. So that is a good thing. However fully vaccinated means that you've had either the one dose of the J&J vaccine, or two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna and waited two weeks. After that is when a person is considered fully vaccinated. We have seen plenty of individuals who have started the vaccination process and then come down with COVID because it does take a period of time for the immunity to take effect. So if you are not at that post two weeks from your last dose and you do have any symptoms or you've been exposed we still recommend that you get tested. The turnaround time also we'll just mention is faster because we are seeing less testing at the state laboratory that's doing a large volume of our testing at our public health lab we're now able in all of the places that we're doing testing at our community sites to turn most of the results around within one day. So it's fast, it's safe, it's easy, it's free. Please take advantage when it's appropriate.

The other thing that we continue to keep our eyes on very much so is the variants, virus variants. So to remind you, there are now about a half a dozen and four different types have actually had cases in our County. You may have noticed for those of you who are following our website closely that we have added a new piece of information on our dashboard and that is tracking the number of variants of each type that have occurred in San Luis Obispo County residents. So what we are seeing over time is that the B.1.1.7 variant or otherwise known as the UK variant is really beginning to crowd out the West coast or California variants, the B.1429 or B.1427. The importance of that is more easily transmitted, is the UK variant than these West coast variants. So that shift toward having more easily spread virus is something that we're very much keeping our eye on. We have also had our first case of the South African variant or B.1.351. Not in our County and not in California, but worth noting. There has been a case in the United States in the upper Midwest

of the so-called India variant, or the double mutant. And again, as India is undergoing just a tremendous impact from this disease, it is believed to be related to this mutation in some regards. So we certainly don't want to see that take hold in our community.

Fortunately of the variants that we're seeing in the United States and our community, there is still full effectiveness of the vaccines. So that's good news but the increased transmission can be as much as 50%. And so we really are in a race against these variants to get to herd immunity, to get community transmission to be relatively non-existent so that there is no more virus around that has the opportunity to mutate. The more cases you have, the more transmission, the more people that are carrying the virus, the more opportunity this virus has to change its genetic structure. So, one other reason we certainly wanna get to a place where we're seeing none or very limited numbers of cases in our community.

So that brings me back to the topic of vaccinations. And as I've said, many times this is our main pathway to putting this pandemic completely in the rear view mirror. We have now completely this week, we no longer have any County registration or appointment setting process. It is all through the state website which is called My Turn. People can go directly to the [myturn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov) website and make themselves an appointment at any of our County mass clinics or any of the other clinic locations, be they pharmacies, doctors, offices, outpatient clinics that are using the system. Not all are, but many are. You can still go to our website as well certainly to get linked to the My Turn, if you know that website by heart, and you wanna go through that way to get connected to My Turn, you can do so at [recoverslo.org/vaccine](https://recoverslo.org/vaccine). And for those that do not have easy access or any access to the internet to do it through the computer, you still can call. You can call the state helpline to make an appointment through My Turn and that phone number is 833-422-4255. That is your best pathway to making an appointment through the phone system.

If you have questions about anything but even about our vaccination availability or policies, we still have our phone assistance center available to help our local constituency. We do have at this time enough vaccine for anyone that wants it. In cases where you decide today, that you are ready to get vaccinated, we are now making available walk-ins at two of our location. The demand has unfortunately dropped that much that we now can accommodate walk-in patients at our Paso Robles site and at our Arroyo Grande site. At this time that is not true for our SLO

site at Cuesta college. We still are seeing all of our appointments filled. It is still the best way to do this is to make an appointment to be sure at any of our sites that you can get in. But the demand is such that we have open appointments consistently at our North County and our South County sites. So we will take walk-ups. Please be sure to check though what days we are holding clinics as that is reducing and make sure that you know what the hours are because we are also beginning to make changes in that. Next week, you'll see more of that. But for instance next Wednesday, we plan to have later our clinics to try to create more accessibility.

You can also in the My Turn system choose your particular vaccine type. For some people, they've read a lot about this, they want a particular vaccine type even within the same technology, Moderna and Pfizer, people may wanna choose one of those. Some others may wanna choose the J&J vaccine. It's only one dose. We do continue to remind particularly women in the ages of 18 to 50, that there has been that very small increase in risk of certain types of blood clots. So that group may want to choose a different product but any three of those vaccines are available in the community. At our sites for the time being, it is still just the Moderna and Pfizer.

As we are seeing the demand decrease, I very much want the community to understand that we are within weeks of doing a way with these mass clinics. We have already started to decrease the number of days that we are having clinics. We've last week four days a week, this week, four days a week, next week we are planning only two days a week. And it will continue to decrease based on the number of people who are looking for appointments. Based on what we're seeing, for next week, it is really a matter of a small number of weeks before we are at the point of diverting these clinics into other community settings as well as continuing to do some public health vaccinations at our routine clinics. So this is your time. If you've been thinking about it and you haven't gotten on it yet, public health clinics are easy, free, accessible, please don't wait. If the only reason you haven't gotten vaccinated yet is because you think that we will be there, for many weeks to come, we will not. So please take advantage of these next few weeks to make your first dose appointment as soon as possible.

We are also, I mentioned that people can, you know they've been able to, for some time now go to other community locations for vaccination, particularly pharmacies, community health centers. We are continuously ramping up our mobile efforts. We posted online at [recoverslo.org/mobilevaccine](https://recoverslo.org/mobilevaccine) an enrollment form, where any

business, any church, any nonprofit organization, any community center, any organization or housing situation that would like for us to come to you, we are ready and willing and able to do that. You just need to register and we will figure out with your organization what the best way is for moving forward, how many people you have, we ask that it's a minimum of 25 people, and we can go much higher than that, but we we want to engage with any organization in bringing vaccine to them and making this as easy as possible. So please look for that opportunity or share that form with your employer or your pastor or anyone who you think might want to take this opportunity for us to do mobile vaccinations.

Finally, just some facts about the vaccine. I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to continuously try to demystify some things that I hear about the vaccine. It's important to know that our nation has a long history of vaccinations. I said yesterday at the board, I'll repeat it here, that vaccinations and clean water are probably the two historically most important things that have enhanced our our longevity and also our health over time. So vast amount of research goes into the development of vaccines in general, and with this vaccine as well. We've heard a number of times about it came to market so fast, it's new technology. It did come to market fast but the technology has been out there for more than a decade. It is in use in some cancer treatments, the mRNA in particular.

I'm referring to and I want to help people understand that the EUA that's causing a lot of uncertainty about whether or not someone is willing to get a vaccine at this time, stands for Emergency Use Authorization. And I say that very carefully with each word because each part of that expression has meaning. So the E is for emergency, it is not experimental. I heard from a large number of people over recent days, that these are experimental drugs. They are not, they have been fully tested. They have gone through all the rigors of any other medical product that comes to market, which means all phases of the clinical trials. Hundreds of thousands of people went through the clinical trials before these were authorized, that's the E, so emergency because we're in the middle of pandemic. Authorized by the Federal Drug Administration as available for use, the U, Emergency Use Authorization. So I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about the use of that term and the use of that opportunity to bring these vaccines forward. It is not experimental. Folks say they're not approved, they're investigational. And I just wanna be clear that that is not the case. They are authorized by our Federal Drug

Administration and they are brought forward for emergency use, not experimental use.

With that, I just finally want to say that please don't take my information. I know that there's skepticism, there is healthy concern. People have had a lot of side effects with the vaccine more so than we see with other vaccines. Most of those side effects are mild. They may be more than mild for a day or two, but we have not seen any more serious vaccine side effects or worse from these vaccines. There are now over 225 million doses that have been administered in the United States. And there are three deaths through this blood clot that are under investigation as potentially or probably being tied to a vaccination. But for the most part, the reports of side effects our Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System is very robust and nationally, we're seeing a very very low proportion of serious side effects. So please, as I said, don't just listen to me, go to CDC, go to other reputable websites for information. And most importantly, talk with your own personal physician. We continue to be available to provide information, but we are just one piece of the informational pie. So I certainly recommend that people talk with their healthcare providers, their physicians, their nurse practitioners in their own home care, health care settings. With that, I will open it up for questions.

- [Reporter] Yeah, Dr. Borenstein you do walk-in policy for vaccinations. Is that both first and second doses

- I'm sorry, walk-in? Yes, that is true. We are seeing our second dose appointments fill up quite quickly and that is reassuring that people are completing the series. So we may have more trouble accommodating walk-ins on the second doses, but yes, We would take someone as long as there's capacity.

- [Reporter] So you still recommend the folks who need the second dose to register-

- For first or second dose, registration for an appointment is your best bet. For people who just sort of decide, Oh, I'm driving by, or today's the day, or I found myself with a free hour, yes, absolutely, we'll take people for either, but primarily for first dose walk-ins.

- [Reporter] And you were just talking about the, we're within weeks now I've seen the County, I guess, disassemble and remove those large-scale vaccination clinics. Will the County consolidate maybe into one site at a point and then looking beyond that, the County would just focus in on some of these mobile sites that you're now entertaining offers for?

- Yeah, so the County has been in the vaccination business ever since vaccines came on the scene 1940s, I guess. So we will continue to make vaccination available at our public health clinics. They happen to also be in Paso Robles, SLO and in Grover Beach. So that will be at much smaller numbers but we will be able to accommodate people still within public health clinics. They just won't be at the sites. And yes, very much so we're gonna continue to grow the opportunities for people to take advantage of mobile vaccination clinics.

- [Reporter] All right, Dr. Bernstein, how close are we to herd immunity locally?

- Yeah that's a good question. So locally, we really are falling behind. The state average at this time, 61% of all eligible people aged 16 and up have at least started the vaccinations, gotten at least the one dose. In our County, we're more like 51%. We have about 36% have gotten fully vaccinated and another 15% who have started. So we're really not doing a whole lot better than half. And as you've heard me say, we wanna get to upwards of 80%, 85%, to achieve herd immunity. With the fall off that we're seeing, it really is breaking my heart to see that folks aren't taking advantage of this opportunity. And I understand that there's a lot of hesitancy out there. Please, please talk with your physician, talk with us, get information, go to the CDC site. This isn't something that is gonna, the pandemic is not gonna go away unless we all do this in the same timeframe.

- [Reporter] And last month there was a decline in local cases and is there a specific reason for that? Is it the vaccine? You know, maybe you can talk a little bit about why we're seeing the numbers drop.

- Yeah, so as I've said, there is a natural curve somewhat to any outbreak. The people who engage with each other tend to get infected and then it goes underground if you're not in that particular community or circle of friends. So we do tend to see natural curves but I absolutely believe it's because we are seeing, even though I said, it's sad that it's only 50%, I do believe that vaccination is playing an important part in why we're seeing a drop off of the number of cases.

- [Reporter] And then just last thing on the hesitancy. I know nationally, there's some folks who don't wanna take the vaccine and all, and there's some folks who just are hesitant to. Are there ways to convince those who are hesitant to get on board?

- Yeah, we wanna be open, we wanna listen. We wanna hear every piece of information from people as to why they are making the decisions they're making

and it's quite variable. So yeah, there is always gonna be a proportion of our population who don't take any vaccinations and they're opposed. And that's not the group that we would like to talk with because quite frankly, I don't think that we're gonna change hearts and minds for those who, whether it's COVID or flu or pneumonia or measles, just don't don't take advantage of vaccine. But there is a very large group, and it's probably about a third of our community who have a wide variety of concerns and information gaps and access issues in some cases and just think they don't need it, who think they're concerned about side effects. And so we would like to have those conversations with people so that we can help people make decisions and hopefully get them to a place where they are ready to say yes to a vaccination.

- [Pressman] Dr. Borenstein in the past, you've presented some numbers on X amount of vaccinations last week and overall, we didn't see that today. Are there any numbers you could share in terms of statistical, just kind of numbers to show us how much there's been a little bit of a slow down here.

- Yeah, so I can say we've been, at our absolute peak, we got close one or two weeks, to 15,000. Mostly we'd been running around 10 to 12,000 vaccinations a week and last week it was closer to 8,000.

- [Pressman] Thanks.

- Okay, thank you.

- Thank you all for being here today. Just a few announcements. You can still get all our counties COVID-19 information on [readyslo.org](https://readyslo.org) and [recoverslo.org/vaccine](https://recoverslo.org/vaccine). Our phone assistance center remains open, Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m. And our recorded public health information line is available, still 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To make an appointment for either your first or second dose of COVID-19 vaccine, please login to [myturn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov). There's also assistance available at the phone number 833-422-4255. You can also find links on our website to this website and phone number at [recoverslo.org/vaccine](https://recoverslo.org/vaccine). As Dr. Borenstein mentioned, we have also begun accepting walk-ins at the Arroyo Grande vaccination clinic as well as the Paso Robles vaccination clinic. But please be sure that you check hours of operation in advance. As she mentioned those hours and days of the week are changing. Free COVID-19 tests remain available at several locations throughout the County. Please go to [emergencyslo.org/testing](https://emergencyslo.org/testing) for those locations and details. And remember that appointments are encouraged although

walk-ins are accepted and the results are generally back in 48 hours or less. Our next regularly scheduled COVID-19 briefing will occur June 2nd at 3:15 PM. Note, this is a change from our previous every every two weeks schedule. If there's pressing COVID-19 updates before then, we will call an urgent press conference and ensure we share the time and date on social media. So please follow SLO County Public Health on social media if you haven't already. Finally you can watch these briefings live on our County's YouTube channel. They are also rebroadcast on SLO County Public Health's Facebook page and on public access channel 21 at 8:00 AM, 5:00 PM and midnight each day until the next briefing occurs. Thank you once again for staying informed, be well. And remember, we will see you here again on Wednesday June at 3:15 PM.