

- Good afternoon. Thank you all for tuning in today to an update on the COVID-19 pandemic from San Luis Obispo County Public Health. My name is Michelle Shoresman, and today is Wednesday, August 18th, 2021. This afternoon we'll have two speakers for you. We will begin with San Luis Obispo County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. James Brescia, and he will be followed by San Luis Obispo County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. After their remarks, there'll be time for questions. Thank you once again to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb, and now SLO County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. James Brescia.

- Good afternoon. And thank you for your continued support of our schools throughout the county. Several schools have already started the new year with full in-person classes and nearly full attendance. All districts, charters, childcare centers, private and parochial schools throughout San Luis Obispo County continue to conference with public health and are fully following all California Department of Public Health mandates. The current state mandates require that all individuals within adult and senior care facilities, K-12 school settings, childcare settings, emergency shelters, healthcare settings, correctional facilities, and public transit wear face coverings. These mandates are required when students and staff are indoors during class time or during any other indoor activity. Students are permitted to remove their face coverings when outdoors or during breaks and meal periods. Healthcare providers are the only ones authorized to provide written exemptions.

I wanna share my appreciation with the Central Coast Medical Association, our local Public Health office, and my staff for facilitating recent online webinar consisting of four prominent local physicians answering questions about COVID-19, the vaccination of children and the health implications. I encourage families to view the webinar and discuss vaccination with their healthcare provider. While vaccine is not required for students, the vaccination helps protect not only the vaccinated, but those who cannot be vaccinated. And I encourage you to consider this and discuss it with your healthcare providers. The recorded webinar is found on the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education YouTube channel. On the 11th of August, Governor Newsom issued a new public health order requiring all school employees in public, private and parochial schools to verify the vaccination status of employees or to test weekly if you are un-vaccinated, as a means to prevent further spread of COVID-19 and to align with the state's commitment to safe in-person instruction. The County Office of Education is facilitating ongoing meetings with public health legal services, all districts, charters, childcare centers, private schools, and parochial schools to share this current information, deadlines and ability to get information. Your interest in our schools is greatly appreciated. And I wanna share the reason that I'm fully vaccinated and participate in regular screenings, and wear my face covering is to protect the young people, the families, the colleagues, and the community members that I'm obligated to serve. We all need to take measures, whatever measures they are to ensure each other's safety and get beyond COVID. I thank you for doing your part in the community to keep us safe and to reduce the spread of COVID.

- Excuse me. Good afternoon everyone. Dr. Penny Borenstein, here as your County Health Officer, it has been a short three weeks since I came before you. We were under the hope that things would continue in a good direction, but that unfortunately is not the case. So why are we here? Because things are unfortunately going in a bad direction in our county. June 15th, we ended the blueprint for a safer economy, everyone took their masks off, people started moving about the community, more so gathering together. But I think if I could say one word about why things are going in the

direction they're going, it's Delta. The Delta variant is a new strain of this vaccine, it is way more infectious, and it may have worse outcomes for people who do become infected. So it has led to more than 1500 new cases in the first two weeks of the month of August, and this is in comparison to 150 cases, so a tenfold increase since the entire month of July, we've experienced just in the first two weeks of August. We've seen more people hospitalized and die with this disease. 32 people today are in the hospital with COVID, eight of them are in intensive care unit. Since I last came before you eight more people have been confirmed to have died from the COVID disease, and we have four more who are pending final death certificates. These are 12 families who are suffering the ravages of this awful disease, and what's even more heartbreaking is that this is completely unnecessary.

We know that the vaccine works, we know that there are some breakthrough cases, we know that it doesn't protect everyone fully from becoming infected, but it is almost universally protective against landing in the hospital, in the intensive care unit struggling for life and from death. So with that, we're dealing with a different pandemic at this moment in time. We did promise you that we would update people ask me all the time, you know, how many of these cases have been Delta? How many of them, you know, have been vaccinated? We do have that information that we look at on a periodic basis. I can say that at the county level, we're seeing the same thing that the nation and the state is where it's almost all Delta. Nationally last report was 83% Delta, statewide it's 91% Delta. Our last sequencing run, and what that means is looking at the full genome or the full DNA, RNA in this structure of this virus that we have had all of our cases that were sequenced a portion of our total cases that were Delta. So that is what we're dealing with. We did say we will update that information monthly at the local level, you can go to [recoverslo.org](https://recoverslo.org) to find that, and that next monthly update will be coming very shortly.

So with all of that, I am here today to unfortunately ask of our community something that none of us want to do, none of us thought we'd go back to, I thank my friends in the media who are wearing their masks in this indoor setting, because that is what I am asking of our entire population. This is a state recommendation. Other counties around us have put out health officer orders, in this county at this moment in time, based on where we are. I am going to do that, which our county has done successfully in the past, and ask of anyone who's in a position of business ownership, venue owner to require that all of your employees and that all of your patrons enter your businesses in the indoor setting, any public indoor setting, that individuals regardless of their vaccination status, revert to wearing a face covering, a mask. We ourselves at the county, as an organization that employs nearly 3000 people are doing the same. We are going to be implementing that as soon as possible. We are going to be signing on our doors that that is our expectation. Our public meetings will revert over to mask wearing. And I urge all of businesses, retail stores, grocery stores, gyms, theaters, entertainment centers, any public location, restaurants, bars, I know people think, oh, but you eat and drink in those places how can you wear a mask? You can. When you need to eat and drink, obviously you need to take the mask off. But these are the kinds of settings, sporting events, especially inside where we are seeing spread.

So, I am urging all of our business owners and all of the owners of any public setting or venue operators to go along with what I am asking of them for this moment in time, in the hopefully peak of the search, but we don't know yet to take this additional action at this time. We're doing this

because the last thing I want to do is to ask any of us to go back to ways that we tried to mitigate the spread previously, which was shutting down. We do not want to shut down businesses, we do not want school children to not go back to school in full-time, in-person all of them. That's the last thing we want to happen. So absent other protection, I will talk about the vaccine, this is the next step that we need to take at this moment in time. Face covering are already required in many indoor settings, so for a lot of you, this will not be news. If you work in a healthcare center, a congregate care facility, a senior center, homeless shelters, the jail, et cetera, we already have universal masking as is true for our schools and youth settings. So this is adding on for the rest of the community when you go out in public in indoor settings. Also remember to wear your mask properly, it has to be snugly fit. You don't want to have air out of the sides, it has to be over the nose and mouth. So we're asking that of everyone. There is a lot of research about the effectiveness of this. I would not be asking of the public to do so if we did not have the documentation, that it really makes a difference. And hopefully you all can recognize that since we all took our masks off in the middle of June, we saw dramatic increases in spread. I did say it's about Delta, but even Delta can be prevented by using a mask.

So secondly, I said I would talk about vaccinations, that is our ticket out of this. At this moment in time, we are at 60%, just a hair shy of 60% of our entire eligible age 12 and up county population that have been fully vaccinated. We're falling a little bit further behind the state average. So we as a community are doing everything we can to bring that number up, but we're now more than 5% beyond where the state is at 65.1% of all statewide California residents, age 12 and above have been fully vaccinated in our county, we're just shy of 60%. We are trying to continue to make vaccinations available in all settings, in mobile settings, in our healthcare clinics, in pediatric patients offices, at healthcare settings, in community pharmacies, and we are making them available across the board at various times of day, all days of the week. And with incentives, if that is what's gonna help you make the decision today, go and get your \$25 gift card at a Public Health clinic. We're happy to offer that, to try to nudge you over the threshold. So we are doing that. We're offering per dose \$25 at our public health clinics through the month of August, at our sites at Grover beach at San Luis Obispo and Paso Robles, where we have public health clinics, and this is for each of the first and second doses. The gift cards are for places like grocery outlet, Target, Home Depot and Amazon. And we expect to have more and different kinds of offerings in the coming weeks. We also are trying to encourage people to help their friends, their neighbors and families make that decision by entering everyone who does make such a successful referral eligible for additional prizes. And we're gonna be doing weekly prizes of \$100 for anyone who refers someone for a vaccination to one of our clinics. So please take that opportunity to help urge, encourage your loved one, your friend, your neighbor, to make the decision.

I do want to talk a little bit about third doses, this has become a prominent issue in the news. And at this in time, I know that you're hearing that we may be looking at boosters, additional doses for everyone who has been vaccinated, but right at this moment, it is for those individuals who are severely immune compromised. Those are the majority of the people who have had breakthrough cases that land in the hospital or worse succumb to this disease. So we need to help protect those people by getting everyone vaccinated. And those individuals with immune compromise need to be given every opportunity to have a successful vaccination outcome. We now have enough research and solid information that shows that a large proportion of people who have severe immune

compromise after the two doses of the mRNA vaccine or the J&J vaccine do not have a sufficient immune response in many cases to protect them from becoming infected and from becoming severely ill. So with that, there is now a recommendation that people of certain categories do get that third dose in the series. The dose is recommended to occur 28 days after the second dose, and it is for the following types of people. And I'm not gonna read this list in its entirety, but to give you a sense of what we mean by severe immune compromised, someone with an active cancer treatment, someone with an organ transplant who is taking immunosuppressive drugs, someone with a stem cell transplant within the last couple of years, someone born with a primary immunodeficiency, individuals with advanced or untreated HIV, or persons who are taking very high doses of steroids, corticosteroids, because their immune system, they need to have their immune system suppressed. So those are the kinds of people we're talking about, statewide that amounts to about 700,000 individuals, and we tend to be about 1% of whatever the state statistic is.

So we're looking at five to 10,000 people in our county who might need that additional dose. We have already offered that on a case by case basis with physician referral. As we move forward with this, we expect to be ready to have people make appointments and self attest that they have one of these conditions, we're waiting on our appointment system, myturn.ca.gov to be ready to accept a third dose appointment. So stay tuned, we expect this to be coming within a matter of days, or by next week, we're waiting anxiously for that vendor to be able to help us with that process. At this point, we in public health are only gonna be offering that third dose at our fixed site clinics, our brick and mortar clinics, not at our mobile clinics. People should also call community pharmacies to find out if they are offering that opportunity. So when it does go live, we hope by next week again, through making your appointments on myturn.ca.gov, or by phone, if you don't have access to internet or have trouble using the system. The phone number to make these appointments is 422-4255, and if you need just general questions answered, you're having trouble with My Turn system or what have you, we keep our local phone system available that is 781-5500.

So I do wanna just take a moment and a pause with our community to talk about where we are. I feel a sense of being disheartened by this, I suspect that's true for many of you, regardless of where you stand in terms of your vaccination status, your willingness to wear a mask, we are all tired of this disease and no more so I would say, than myself and my staff who continue to work diligently at getting us over the finish line. It's frustrating, it's exhausting, it's scary. But despite our differences, we are Americans, we have conquered greatness in our lives, in our history, and we can do this again. I've said this many times, and I know that they're probably quite a few people who have tuned out, but I feel the necessity to say, we're going to stay with you and we're gonna stay this course until we get over the finish line. So whatever metaphors that is for you, I've been thinking a lot about this is, is my staff who are exhausted. I'm like, "Nope, we're not gonna leave the ball "on the 20 yard line on the field." We're not gonna leave the fire when it's 90% contained just for it to rear its head again. We're not gonna undo 20 months of effort on this pandemic, like we're seeing with Afghanistan 20 years. You walk away prematurely or without a solid exit strategy in place and things can go badly, and that's what we're seeing here. And I think that exit strategy, I know that not everyone feels this way, but it is, get vaccinated.

There's a large portion of people that are still sitting on the sidelines, waiting for information, waiting for time to pass, reading various things. But at the end of the day, there's a small portion who are

opposed to vaccines in general. The rest of us either know through our own lives or know through history that vaccines work. They have changed humanity, whether it's 100 years, you know, of vaccinology that is well-known, whether the decades of research, scientists, healthcare providers who are, you know, well understand that these vaccines are successful. 358 million doses now administered in the United States, 4.78 billion doses administered in the world. This is not an experiment, this is our ticket home. So I hear on a daily basis, especially lately, members of the public, but even more troubling to me are members of My Health, the medical community, all four chiefs of staff of all four of our hospitals have implored me to do a mask mandate, to do a vaccination mandate, to do something, to change the trajectory that we're on, to do what we know we can do to get past this.

And at the end of the day, I'm powerless. I can issue mandates. I can try to work with our staff to make vaccines available, but it really is each individual looking into their heart and their soul and saying, this isn't a war amongst ourselves, it is a war with the virus. We know it works. We know it is through humanity's existence on the planet, maybe second only to clean water, the thing that has gotten us through really challenging times. It helped us eliminate smallpox from the face of the earth, it helped us get this close on polio, if I can share with you the only place on the planet that currently has polio is on the Afghan-Pakistan border. We know how to do this. And if you're waiting, if you're scared, if you read something from a blog, talk to your doctor, go to CDC website, talk to almost any physician in this county, and they will tell you that science is clear. I just can do nothing else, but implore you to take that step. In the meantime, we're gonna do what we need to do to protect everyone, especially the most vulnerable, and that is to revert to using masks until we can get rid of this surge, and hope like heck that this is the last time. If we can get ourselves to that, I don't know what the number is, I get asked all the time, 80, 90, 95% vaccination, but whatever it is, we can do that. Hopefully it's coming for the younger children, and that is important. I will offer one more thing, I know it sounded like I was winding up, I do wanna offer one more comment that was really heartbreaking to me yesterday. Three of my colleagues, three different County Health Officers told of stories of a 13 or a 14 year old, otherwise healthy, who died of this disease within the last week. So if you think this doesn't affect children, it doesn't affect you healthy young people, you're incorrect. Our pediatrics hospital, Valley Children's hospital is filled with children experiencing COVID. I will leave you with that. I'm asking everyone to take a moment to decide what's important to you and how we can get back to normalcy as a collective community. And with that, I'll open it up for questions.

- [Reporter] Dr. Borenstein, hello to you, nice to see you. But you know, not under these circumstances, you say 60% of the county has been fully vaccinated, it's at least 40%. I'm just doing a quick calculations, that's tens of thousands of people--

- 80,000.

- [Reporter] Pardon me.

- 80,000 Individuals aged 12 and up who have yet to receive one vaccine.

- [Reporter] And I mean, you just spoke at length at that, but I mean how daunting of a task then is it for the county to get those? Because everyone who's eligible has had months now to receive the

vaccine. So would it imply sort of speak that they're choosing not to for whatever reason, but how daunting of a task is now for the county to get up to those numbers that you wanna get up to.

- There is capacity to handle it. If we had to stand up mass clinics again, if suddenly tens of thousands of people changed their mind for whatever reason we would meet the need. We are under-utilizing the capacity of our community clinics of our healthcare providers of our mobile clinics. So we can get there, we did twice as many in the first six months of vaccine availability.

- [Reporter] And then you said the masking announcement today, this is to prevent possible closure again reductions, the closure of businesses, schools, et cetera, would that possibly be on the table as this continues to head in the wrong direction possibly?

- So, as I've said throughout this pandemic, you know, we meet it where it's at, and we do the least intrusive things. I have no appetite for going back to any kind of closures of our activities. We know what works, and if we need to do social distancing, we need to go back to masking, which is the most next protective thing and easiest thing to do. We'll do that. I am not interested in destroying any more businesses. You know, I'm not playing claim that I have, but I know that there's been a lot of suffering in the economy. So for those who wanna think about making their next decision just on the basis of the economy, that's, you know, what I would offer is to please make the decision to get vaccinated. I think there's an awful lot of people who just haven't gotten around to it, and think, I'll do this at any point. I'll do it next month, I'll do it before the winter, I'll do it when I come back from my vacation, I'll do it. You know, yeah. You know, I've sort of gotten past the, you know, all the mythology around this vaccine or the concern that we don't know enough about this vaccine, I think we do now. It's why I offer to people to please talk to your own physician. There is not a pediatrician in this community that would not support advocating, getting vaccinated if you're aged 12 and up, and they're waiting anxiously for the next age group. So I guess I'm reaching out as I've said on many occasions, not to the people who long ago decided regardless of the type of vaccine, they are never gonna get a vaccination, but there are an awful lot of people, 98% of our school population who get vaccinated for 20 different diseases. There's nothing different about this one, there's nothing different about the way the vaccine was manufactured. It was done fast because it was an emergency, but we're past experimentation.

- [Reporter] Dr. Borenstein, could you talk more about, this is a mass recommendation, non-mandate, can you talk about how you decided to do a recommendation versus a mandate, especially considering kind of puts businesses in a tough position to have to make their own decision and enforce that for their customers?

- Yeah, that is what we're asking of our partners in the public sector, in the private business world to do based on what is in front of us in terms of disease to take that civic responsibility. And if that does not change the nature of the curve that's in front of us, we would be open to considering other actions. But at this point in time, I have always said, I do not relish the public health authority that I've been given, and I will only use it cautiously and judiciously and as needed. So this is a first step.

- [Reporter] I have a question for either Dr. Borenstein or doctor Dr. Brescia or both. Dr. Brescia, you talked about how schools, all schools, public charter and private schools are required to enforce the mask mandate from the state, and then you said that you're seeing non-compliance from the

schools, from my understanding some private schools are not following the masking mandate. So I'm just curious how you, from your perspective from SLO Co, how are you planning on enforcing this? Are you planning on enforcing this from a county level at all?

- Well, to the best of my knowledge that all schools are following the guidelines, they've all received the information. We have a very extensive network in this county because of Diablo Canyon and the emergency communications, I'm most connected with our Catholic school network, and when I'm talking to the school principals, I mean, they're taking supplies and they're following directives and responding. So if I am aware of someone not doing that, I will speak to them, and then, or public health will speak to them. But to the best of my knowledge, every agency serving children, whether it is government funded or tuition funded right now is following the expectations.

- [Reporter] And like occupancy, like what do you mean, are there any repercussions that could happen--

- Well, I don't have police authority if that's what you're asking. I really am not sure what the legal ramifications would be, I can't imagine an insurance carrier would keep insurance on an entity. I know that's true for all of our government entities, and I'm assuming it's the same for all of our private entities. When I was a private school administrator, we were expected to follow health department mandates and guidelines.

- [Reporter] Yeah. Thank you. I also have a question for Dr. Borenstein as well, these second doses of the COVID vaccine for the folks that can receive them, they seem to be coming at the same, like with eligibility and such seem to be coming kind of at the same time the flu vaccine is gonna be available as well, are you aware of how the vaccines may interact? Like, can you get them both at the same time? How does that work?

- Yeah. So there's been more research that has come out, and in fact, recently CDC has indicated that there does not need to be any waiting period between vaccines. So you can get them on the same day, you can get them a day apart, you can get them two weeks apart, regardless. So, in the public health department, we traditionally offer flu vaccine, we will continue to do that alongside the COVID vaccine. And I'm sure the same is true, I've even started to see in my movement about the county, that now some of the COVID vaccine signs have been replaced by, Get your flu shot here. I wish that they were both there at the same time, but you can get them at the same time, or separated by any length of time between them.

- [Reporter] I have one question for Dr. Brescia, that, since the young students are the one that are not eligible for vaccination, it sounds like the two basic ways to approach the problem is masking and testing if you could talk about how that is gonna be applied to students and staff.

- So above two years old masking is required indoor settings for any adult, and for the screening or the testing, we are requiring individuals that do not have full vaccination to be screened weekly, and then encouraging others and making it available to screen on an ongoing basis. So at this point, the requirements in all classrooms and childcare settings, everyone has their mask on when they're interacting in person indoors, and then employees, those that are on our payroll, whether they're a substitute or a regular employee, if they're vaccinated they're not required to screen weekly. If they are un-vaccinated, excuse me, I said that backwards. If they are un-vaccinated, the

requirement is to screen weekly. And then again, encouraging, just like I said, I myself am going this week, and several of my leadership members are regularly doing that to set examples for the rest of our staff.

- [Reporter] Dr. Brescia, don't leave yet. So there's organized groups in the county, parents particularly opposed to masking in schools, they're very public in their stance and in their, asking if not demanding that school districts, particularly in the South County take away masking, do any school districts have the authority to do that? Are they under the state guidance they're required to--

- No. Similar to the same, we don't have the authority to waive licensure requirements or background checks. These are requirements of what our agencies adhere to. There are ramifications aside from the health implications of this, there are legal ramifications, mainly involving insurance coverage and other aspects. And I respect people's opinions and rights, but this is a non-negotiable right now.

- [Reporter] The school board has no authority to take away the masking zone.

- The school board can express their opinion, but they have no legal authority to override the state health department mandate.

- [Reporter] And then what, school's opening all across the county here, if they haven't already this week, maybe next week, just your overall message to parents as they do now send their kids back, in most cases, I would assume all day long.

- We have some success this week, and last week there were three days of Atascadero Unified was one of the first to start along with some of our private and parochial schools. Students are back in classrooms. and interviewed them. And I think what you said right there is they're happy to see their friends, they're happy to be back there, and they're okay with these. We as adults need to do the right thing and back off a little bit right now.

- [Reporter] Should parents feel safe sending their kids back in their classrooms, or--

- We're taking precautions across the board to ensure the safety of the children when they're in the rooms of our staff, of vulnerable adults that they may return to, every administrator is taking this seriously.

- Thank you all once again for being here, just a few closing reminders, you can still get all our counties COVID-19 information on [emergencyslo.org](https://www.emergencyslo.org), or [recoveryslo.org/vaccine](https://www.recoveryslo.org/vaccine). Staff at our phone center can also answer your questions between 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. Monday through Friday at 781-5500. I'll give that phone number and a web address one more time. If you'd like to make an appointment to get vaccinated, the web address is [myturn.ca.gov](https://www.myturn.ca.gov). And the phone number is 422-4255. Walk-ins are also available at all three of our public health clinics in San Luis Obispo Grover Beach and Paso Robles. But please check the when and where to get vaccinated page on [recoveryslo.org](https://www.recoveryslo.org) for all the details. Also remember that if you experience symptoms for COVID-19, there's still free COVID-19 testing available at the San Luis Obispo, Veteran's Hall, and at Centennial park in Paso Robles. Again for details on testing, go to [emergencyslo.org/testing](https://www.emergencyslo.org/testing). Good afternoon, and thank you all for being here today.