

- Good afternoon. Today is Tuesday, August 31st, 2021. My name is Michelle Shoresman and I'd like to welcome you to today's San Luis Obispo County COVID-19 media briefing. This afternoon, we'll have six speakers for you. We will begin with San Luis Obispo County Health Officer, Dr. Penny Borenstein. And she will be followed by Mr. Mark Lisa, Chief Executive Officer of Tenet Health Central Coast, Mr. Alan Iftiniuk, President and CEO of Dignity Health, French Hospital Medical Center, Dr. Tom Vendegna, Chief Medical Officer from French Hospital Medical Center, Dr. Ross Michel, Medical Director of the ICU for Sierra Vista Regional Medical Center, and Dr. Trees Ritter, Chief Medical Officer of Arroyo Grande Community Hospital. After all their remarks, we will have time for questions. Thank you once again, to our American sign language interpreter, Robin Babb, and now, County Health Officer Dr. Penny Borenstein.

- Good afternoon, everyone. I'm sorry, unfortunately, to be with you or here again so soon, but our situation continues to change. So a mere two weeks ago, I came before you on August 18th in the hopes that we could begin to turn the corner. Unfortunately, the surge has continued to accelerate with respect to COVID-19 cases and the aftermath of those cases. So far in the month of August, we have seen over 3,500 cases, 3,543 to be exact through today. And again, that's a comparison with just over 150 cases in the entire month of June, when we thought all was well. Even more concerning than these case numbers are the surge that we are seeing in our healthcare system particularly our hospitals. We have had sadly, 11 more deaths since I last spoke to you and eight more are pending final death certificates we believe are due to COVID. Today we have 67 individuals hospitalized with COVID-19 disease and of those 20 are in intensive care.

These numbers supersede anything that we have seen in this pandemic, including in our winter surge, total hospitalizations, total number of individuals in intensive care units are the highest they have ever been in this COVID pandemic. And unlike in January, we are now fully open. So we have a higher risk of even further transmission. Our hospitals remember our caring for everyone, not just COVID patients. They see people with car accidents, with broken bones, with cancer, and this imposition on our healthcare system has impacts for all of those diseases as well. So we don't want to put even more stress on our hospitals as this surge may lead to completely overwhelming our healthcare system and especially our hospitals. I have a number of speakers today who can speak more firsthand to that, but there is some good news that even with respect to the Delta variation that we're seeing, there are ways that we can protect ourselves. Delta is today the dominant, the almost exclusive variant of the virus that we're seeing statewide, it is 98%. And we are seeing something quite similar in our county. With that, as I mentioned the health care system demands, we also have quite a few outbreaks in all walks of life, in our schools, we're seeing again, in our long-term care living facilities, businesses, we have a total of close to 90 different outbreaks that we are managing or monitoring in the county as we speak.

So with that, I am revisiting what we can do to protect ourselves and particularly in the arena of masks. Again, I came before you just a couple of weeks ago and asked of everyone in the community, the public and business owners that we take action and begin to wear masks indoors. This is a tried and true method of prevention of this disease, along with a host of other respiratory diseases. And we need to do it. We need to do it now in order to preserve our hospital capacity and our healthcare system. So therefore we have not seen a change due to what we've experienced in terms of additional mask wearing in the last two weeks. So I come before you today to notify the

community that we are invoking, that I am invoking as your health officer, a mask mandate for the county of San Louis Obispo. This will go into effect tonight at midnight, September 1st, 12:01 AM.

So everyone, regardless of vaccination status, vaccinated or unvaccinated will be required as you move about through public settings to wear a face covering or a mask. That mask should cover the nose and mouth and be snugly fitted and not simply a bandana or a piece of fabric or live, resting on your chin. We need to do this. We need to do this for the most vulnerable in our community. There are of course exceptions, individuals under the age of two are not required to wear masks and certainly people with certain medical and mental health conditions that cannot wear masks are also exempted from this order. But the vast majority of people we'll have to comply with this order. It will impact pretty much everywhere that you go in your public movement about the county, restaurants, bars, retail shops, fitness centers, museums, card rooms, entertainment centers, and the like. Masking, as I mentioned, is a tried and true prevention method against this disease and it is a key tool in stopping this surge. It is not something I want to do.

As I mentioned to you two weeks ago, I asked that we do it on a voluntary basis and hope to see change. I know that there is a variety of opinion on this. However, I feel it is the necessary and right thing to do to protect, especially the most vulnerable and those who can not get vaccinated in our community. Having said that I can assure you that we will continuously revisit this order and we'll take action in one direction or the other. Hopefully we will be able to remove this requirement as soon as possible when we begin to see that our numbers and our community rate of transmission decreases. Masking, of course, is not the only tool for prevention of this disease. Vaccination continues to be the key tool, the best way that we can get past this disease. Mounting data shows that even with this Delta variant, that it is very protective. The vaccine is very protective. And even though we are seeing breakthrough cases more and more, we are not seeing high rates of people who are fully vaccinated landing in the hospital or dying. We have had some of those cases and especially among the deaths are people who had very significant immunocompromised conditions.

So when you hear our numbers, you may think it's not that big of a protection device vaccination, but in fact, it is. So we've updated our numbers as promised. This will be posted today, if not already, with respect to the percent of cases, hospitalizations and deaths that are among unvaccinated versus the vaccinated population. So our data now we are looking at since June 15th, June 15th has a couple of important parameters. It is when we all were allowed to our masks off, it is also when we saw that everyone of the ages, 12 and up had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated. So with that, since June 15th, our numbers show that 77% of all cases are among the unvaccinated. 86% of those hospitalized are among the unvaccinated and 79% of deaths. Now that may seem like shouldn't that number be much higher. As I mentioned, there are a few individuals with significant underlying medical conditions who did pass due to COVID vaccine, despite having been fully vaccinated, that I think is an important message about why we all need to do better. These trends are consistent with what is being seen at the state level, and we will continue to see more breakthrough cases.

However, I just want to reiterate, if you are fully vaccinated, healthy adult, without these severe immune compromising conditions, the likelihood of your landing in the hospital ICU or dying from this disease considers to be quite low compared to that have the unvaccinated population. So we

would not be here today talking about this mask mandate or the hospital capacity if we were just looking at the percentages, really vaccination is the tool. Our numbers are small. So the more we get vaccinated, we may see more breakthrough cases, but we expect to see fewer numbers. That is what's playing out in other counties. This data is all available to you on recoverslo.org/vaccine at our website and we'll be updating these charts regularly. So again, please get vaccinated in the interim. I am asking, requiring that everyone in the indoor setting wear masks, let's end this pandemic for good and move on in our lives. We all wanna take off our masks. We all wanna go back to all the activities we enjoy. We all want to gather securely and safely with loved ones, neighbors, friends, family. So with that, I'm gonna turn the podium over to some of my dear colleagues from the hospital sector. And I think we are beginning with Mr. Mark Lisa, CEO and President of Tenet Health system.

- Thank you, Dr. Borenstein. Good afternoon, everybody. I'm mark Lisa, the CEO of Tenet Health Central Coast comprised of both Sierra Vista and Regional Medical Center and Twin Cities Community Hospital, along with several primary and especially outpatient care centers across our region. Despite what you may have, or have not heard, our hospitals are treating many patients with severe and contagious disease. The disease is devastating to patients and their families, and also quite resource intensive. So far the common denominator for approximately 95% of our COVID patients is that they are unvaccinated. COVID also adds the additional challenge for all healthcare providers and community members to continue to focus on preventive care. And treatment for such deadly conditions like cancer, stroke, and diseases of the liver and the heart. We are blessed with a team of healthcare professionals whose primary duty is to their patients and to their communities. They have a very strong work ethic and strong esprit de Corps, but they are also hoping for an end to this pandemic as are my colleagues in the other hospitals in the county. They are tired. They are drained, but what keeps him going is a love of their patients. My personal message to you all, this is real. This is the worst that we've seen so far. The virus doesn't care how you vote. The virus doesn't take its cues from social media and the virus doesn't engage in conspiracy theory. The virus knows that it wants to live. It knows best who is willing to host it so that it can grow and replicate and change. If you no longer want to wear masks, if you want our nation to get back to normal, if you wanna go about your daily lives as before, then please, for the time being, wear a mask, maintain social distancing and get vaccinated. Thank you very much. Alan.

- Thank you, Mark. Good afternoon. I'm Alan Iftiniuk, President and CEO, Dignity Health French Hospital Medical Center in San Luis Obispo. I wanna start out with this, true caregivers rise to any challenge and put the wellbeing of others first. And that's what we're talking about. Putting the wellbeing of others first. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, French Hospital, quickly established protocols to treat not only COVID positive patients, but to care for all others in need as well. We were able to adapt in a manner that maintained very high levels of safety for our staff patients while also maintaining a high quality of care that our patients expect from us and deserve. Our incredible team was prepared and ready to care for patients and was quick to collaborate with our county public health department, office of emergency services, local organizations and other hospitals to prepare for potential surges. Today, we are prepared to care for the community as well, including those with COVID-19. But as mark indicated, this pandemic has stressed our operations. We are doing our part to maintain a safe environment in our hospitals. We are now imploring our community to SLO the spread of COVID-19 by taking the appropriate safety measures to protect

themselves and their loved ones. The recent increase in coronavirus cases have impacted both the community as well as our hospital staffing levels. We are facing yet as Mark indicated and Penny indicated another surge. And the mental and physical toll this pandemic has taken on the healthcare staff is becoming more and more apparent with each passing day. Undoubtedly staff are growing increasingly disheartened to again, see such critically ill COVID-19 patients when there are in fact preventative measures such as getting vaccinated and wearing masks. The COVID surge has limited our ability to continue some hospital operations, such as elective surgeries, which we now evaluate on a daily basis due to staffing and bed availability. Make no mistake, as others have said, COVID-19 and the Delta variant are on the rise in our community. And the best defense is to get vaccinated and to wear your mask. The vaccine is free to you and is readily available to all. If we do our part, together we can slow the spread of COVID-19 and allow San Louis Obispo and all of us to get back to a more normal basis. Please get vaccinated. Please wear your masks. Thank you. Now I'd like to introduce Dr. Tom Vendegna. Tom.

- Thank you, Alan. Thank you, Penny. I was introduced as the Chief Medical Officer at French Hospital, which I currently am, but prior to that for 25 years, I've been a critical care physician. And in all my years, I have never seen anything like the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID Delta surge that we are currently experiencing has caused a great influx of patients all of a sudden into our hospital, in the emergency department, the medical floors in the ICU. This has caused an increase in volume and acuity for the nurses and physicians. Now, remember these are the same nurses and physicians that have been doing this since March, 2020. They are getting tired of this. Their efforts are amazing, but like all of you in the community, they want this pandemic to end. We have seen too many people succumb to this illness. We have also seen firsthand the devastating impacts that it has on those who survive. We want a healthy community. We don't want to see avoidable cases come to our hospitals. You can do your part by getting your vaccine and wearing a mask while you are indoors or in crowded places. As Penny Borenstein mentioned, masks are a well-studied way of suppressing viral spread. And this in combination with the vaccine will bring the surge down fairly rapidly. The Delta variant currently is to infectious for the 60 or 70% of our population that are currently vaccinated. We need masks in addition to the vaccine, we know the vaccination has been FDA approved, it's safe and it's effective. For the safety of our community, our family, our friends, our neighbors, please get yourself vaccinated and please wear masks while indoors and in crowded places. And I'd like to introduce my colleague, Dr. Ross Michel.

- Thank you, Dr. Vendegna. Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Ross Michel, Medical Director of the Intensive Care Unit, Sierra Vista Regional Medical Center. For the past several weeks, we've seen a dramatic increase in the number of hospital admissions for COVID-19. Right now we have far too many patients in our local ICUs who are critically ill with this preventable disease. This is exhausting our county's medical resources, making it more difficult for us to care for people with other conditions like strokes, heart attacks, trauma, and cancer. The science is clear that wearing masks can slow the spread of this disease. We also have safe and effective vaccines that are readily available to our community. We've already lost too many people in San Luis Obispo county to COVID. Please help your local healthcare workers in this pandemic by wearing a mask and getting vaccinated. I'd like to introduce Dr. Trees Ritter.

- Thank you, Dr. Michel. Okay, so my name is Trees Ritter. I am not only the Chief Medical Officer for Arroyo Grande Community Hospital, but I'm also a full-time practicing infectious disease physician and have been on the front line with all my colleagues here since March of 2020, when this problem was pushed upon us. So I wear several different hats. And one of the things I want to share with you today is that the hat I wear is Chief Medical Officer, where I am the liaison between what's happening in the hospital and all of our physicians and I get daily calls asking if there's anything I know about what they can do to help lighten their load as they are being overwhelmed, they are exhausted. We're dealing with staffing shortages. We're having to limit services that we provide everybody is exhausted. And we are looking for the help of the community, and we know exactly what needs to happen. We call these non-pharmacologic interventions because we are in the hospital. That's the end of the line. We're not gonna be able to do anything to prevent the disease. Once people end up in our emergency departments in our hospital beds and in our Intensive Care Unit beds. And so we know that staying away from people when you're sick is important. We know that social distancing is important. We know that masking is important and works, and we'd like to see people return to doing that as not only as a way to protect themselves, but to protect others. Because we know that there is a significant portion of this disease where people will spread disease before they even know that they've had it. And we know that that getting tested is important as well. All of these services are available. And most importantly, we know that vaccines are effective and work, and we have great correlation between the populations that are unvaccinated and how frequently they end up in the hospitals. So we know that vaccines work, they're safe, they're effective, they're FDA approved, and we would encourage everyone who's eligible to get vaccinated and returned to indoor masking. With that, I will turn it over, I believe that we're gonna take questions now.

- I'm available for questions as are any of our speakers. I also wanted to introduce the Susan Anderson, who is the hospital President, CEO for Marion Hospital, under which Arroyo Grande Community Hospital is licensed. So one of our other CEO's in this county. So any of us are available for questions. Should there be any.

- [Woman] I have two questions. So I'm not sure if this was mentioned, but is there a timeline on how long the mask mandate is going to be in place at public indoor areas?

- My answer is as long as necessary, and hopefully that will be as short as possible.

- [Woman] And my second question is a few weeks ago, I did talk to a SLO County resident who says, "The Delta variant is a watered down version of COVID-19." Is there anyone who would like to make a comment or response to this?

- I'll let our infectious disease doctor handle that.

- Sure, so actually, I would argue that the opposite is probably true. What we've seen is that we know that as viruses replicate through hosts in this case, it's a human host, it will undergo mutations and those mutations will result in certain fitnesses and allowing it to spread more easily. And that's exactly what we've seen with Delta. We actually see that the amount of virus that is in people when they have Delta variant versus some of the earlier variants, is up to 1,000 times more than we were seeing with other people, which is why it is so transmissible. There isn't a specific change in the virus

itself that allows it to attach to the human cells easier. It's rather, there's just so much more of it. Yeah, of course.

- [Woman] So I guess this would be for Dr. Borenstein. We've heard that there's been an increase in demand for COVID tests. Does the county have any plans to increase its testing capacity to, I know there are people who were previously at being able to walk in for tests. Is that still the case?

- Yeah. The question regarding what is our capacity for testing and for adding more in response to increasing demand, we are seeing increasing numbers of people being tested at our community sites. We presume the same is true at not just the public health sites, but urgent care, doctor's offices, other places where COVID testing occurs. We are in the process of expanding our capacity. We've added lanes to our existing testing sites in SLO county or about to, I'm not sure it's happened yet. SLO city and Paso Robles are the two locations we currently have, and we are in the process of trying to stand up another south county location. So yes, we're expanding in response to increasing demand for testing.

- [Woman] Can I put a question about the case data. I know this is the first time those people will have seen this data. And I mean, would, I think you kind of addressed this earlier, but what would you say to people who feel like the vaccine will prevent them from getting COVID, maybe are younger and feel like if they get COVID, it won't be a big deal. I mean, what would you say to people like that?

- Right, so the question, there are a lot of people who feel invincible from this disease, whether they're 10, 12, 25, or 78. People who feel healthy in good condition, they've always been able to fight off respiratory diseases of various sorts up till now. And most of them will, especially the younger ones. What I would say is, however, all the concerns that people have about vaccine side effects and maybe serious side effects, are that much more of a higher risk if you get this disease, I was recently talking with a friend who has yet to vaccinate her teenagers. It's not someone who is really opposed to vaccinations in general. They've gotten all their other school vaccinations and trying to get to the heart of, well, why not this disease? This is the one that's circulating now. We don't have measles now, we don't have polio now, we don't have diphtheria. And yet 98% of our children are vaccinated for those diseases so that we can maintain that status of not having those diseases. And the answer is still, there are lots of people who are scared of this vaccine. They heard about heart conditions in young people. They heard about fertility problems. They heard of... Some of those things, not the fertility issues, but there have been cases of thrombosis or a blood clot. There've been cases of heart impacts, Myocarditis. Those pale compared to the impacts that even a young person is likely to experience from the disease versus the vaccine. So that's what I would say is yes, you may have side effects from the vaccine, some soreness feeling down, not even being able to get out of bed for a day or two. I've heard that from many friends and family members that pales compared to not only the acute symptoms of disease that may occur not will, but may occur regardless of your age and even more so ongoing symptoms. This is turning out to be more of a chronic disease. We don't know yet if it's 5%, 10%, 30%, but many people, including young people who have gotten COVID-19 have gone on to have significant, long standing consequences, neurologic in terms of brain fog, memory, confusion, mood changes, as well as physical symptoms, ongoing problems with respiratory function, lung function, heart conditions, et cetera. So I don't know how to say it more clearly, but

there are still a lot of people who really believe that the risk of the vaccine outweighs the likelihood of them having significant impacts from the disease, but they're really taking their chances and not doing the mathematic risk assessment properly is what I would say.

- [Woman] And then now it's gained national attention that some people who are against vaccinations are pushing fraudulent COVID cures like ivermectin, the FDA has been pushing back against that. Have you all been asked about that? Is that something you're concerned about?

- We have, and I would ask one of our physicians who actually sees patients about their thoughts about what they're seeing in terms of side effects from those.

- Yeah, we are unfortunately seeing people and some of them are quite demanding in their desire for these medications that really don't treat COVID. And if you think about the way that they would work, the pharmacology of it, it doesn't make sense that they would treat this viral infection. And all of this data is extrapolated from bench-top research, where they put a very, very high concentration, for example, of ivermectin and viruses don't grow on that. But I would argue that if you put a concentration of apple juice or coffee or aspirin, or a number of other things, if you put the concentration high enough, there's gonna be no viral growth. And when they've looked at these studies in people at dosing that is tolerable to the human, there is no effect. And unfortunately there's a lot of misinformation out there and people like simple answers. They like to think that there's a magic pill out there, that they get the cheat codes, that they can figure this out and not have to get sick from it. And if that were the case, we would be giving it, but it is not effective.

- [Man] One of the things that I've heard repeated is I've already had COVID, I don't need to get vaccinated. How would you address someone that sounds like that?

- Also that's an issue that we address routinely. You want me to stay up and answer this? Yeah. So there is protective immunity after having COVID, but the durability meaning how long that lasts and how effective it is less than the durability provided by the vaccine. And those that have had natural infection and then get vaccinated actually probably have the best type of, or they have very robust antibodies. And there's great data that was published about six or eight weeks ago in nature, which is one of the most preeminent scientific journals that looked at antibody response after native infection to a variant before Delta to Delta. And those people were essentially unprotected. And so our recommendation is that even if you've had COVID before that we recommend that you do get vaccinated.

- [Woman] Any questions?

- I just make one comment that you alluded to Dr. Borenstein. And I think you had a question too, is that there are many people, well, the majority of people in our hospital, if not the overwhelming majority are unvaccinated, the other thing to point out is they get very ill and they're younger with the Delta variant. We have seen 20, 30, 40 year olds in our ICUs. So this is a very infectious variant, it is not like we've seen before, where it was only older people, now it's younger people, and these are unvaccinated folks. So again, points to getting vaccinated.

- [Woman] Just one more question. When you say in the release, you mentioned that these are people who are not fully vaccinated, so I'm assuming some of these people must be partially vaccinated potentially. Yeah.

- Yeah, so in our data, unless the person is known to have had either the one dose of J&J, or the two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna, plus two weeks since their last dose, they would be considered in the unvaccinated category. So I guess the way to categorize that group is not fully vaccinated, as opposed to completely unvaccinated. And there's undoubtedly some degree of protection after that first dose, or if two weeks have not passed, but they're still at risk until they reach that point of full vaccination.

- [Man] You guys just, the county just had its 100 mobile vaccine clinic yesterday. I'm assuming those have been pretty successful. But I was just curious if there's with this heavy emphasis on vaccines today and the unvaccinated getting, being the main ones who are getting sick. Is there anything that you guys are doing outside of those mobile clinics to try to get more people vaccinated?

- Vaccination is being offered everywhere and anywhere, community pharmacies, small and big ones, physician's offices, pediatricians in this county, especially have gotten on board with getting vaccine. We're still working hard on the adult practitioners who are used to either sending their patients to public health or community pharmacies. We're happy to be part of that solution as well, our routine public health clinics. And then we have found great success in some communities that we are really targeting who have some of the lowest rates in our county. We look every single week at what the vaccination rate is by age, by race, by ethnicity, by geography. And we really target our efforts to the most vulnerable communities. We've seen great progress, including going door to door and talking to people, not so much trying to twist arms, but to make sure they know there's a pop-up clinic happening in your community today. You can go there now, walk in, it's free, it's easy. So we've been seeing some great success with some of that. It's a hard slog, but we're gonna keep doing it because we want to get our 60% fully vaccinated to 90% plus. I know those numbers have changed over time. I know that there are lots of people who will say, wait, you told us way back when 60, 70% we're good, not with Delta and just not what we're seeing with this disease. So we wanna get those rates of vaccination very high.

- [Woman] I have one more question. In this county are there any outbreaks in schools as most students are back in person?

- We are seeing quite a number of school, a large number of schools that have at least one case, almost 50% of the schools have experienced at least one case. However, as you heard from Dr. Brush at our last outing here, that we believe that a lot of that transmission is happening in the community, not in the classroom. That's why students are masked. It's the same reason we're asking the adults to model that behavior. Thank you.

- Thank you all for being here. Thank you to our speakers. Just a few closing reminders to get some information out here. Remember you can still get all our counties, COVID-19 response information on [emergencyslo.org](https://www.emergencyslo.org) and [recoverlo.org/vaccine](https://www.recoverlo.org/vaccine). We also continue to maintain our phone center that can be reached at 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday. And that number is 781-5500. As all of our speakers have said, it's time to get vaccinated. Vaccine is free and widely available.

To find a public health clinic, and many other clinics, you can go to myturn.ca.gov. And if you do not have good access to the internet and would rather use the phone, the number for that location is 422-4255. We also allow walk-ins at our three public health clinics in Grover Beach, Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo. And remember one more note, if you're experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, there's still free COVID-19 testing in San Luis Obispo at the Veteran's Hall and in Paso Robles and the details about our testing locations are also at emergencyslo.org/testing. Good afternoon. And thank you all once again for being here and have a great and safe day.