

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Lily Haight with local news for October 5, 2021.

Jefferson County Public Health reported 14 new cases of COVID-19 yesterday. This brings our total case count, since the beginning of the pandemic, up to 1,019. In the past two weeks, there have been 87 reported COVID-19 cases in Jefferson County. According to public health officer Dr. Allison Berry, Jefferson County's case rate is decreasing but now hitting a plateau, and the rate is still much higher than it needs to be to lift current restrictions, at 276 per 100,000. Berry said that in order to lift the mandate requiring people to show their vaccine cards in order to eat indoors, our case rate needs to be much lower, at around 75 per 100,000.

At the commissioners meeting on Monday morning, Dr. Berry explained that the public health department is currently investigating a few clusters of cases throughout the county. One cluster is down in Brinnon, where the public health department is seeing social spread in groups of kids. Dr. Berry said they will be investigating to see if the spread is happening in the school district. Another cluster of cases is being investigated on the west end of the county. The public health department will be giving rapid testing kits to the fire departments in rural areas in Jefferson County so that those who have come into contact with someone COVID-positive can get tested without having to drive to Port Townsend.

Jefferson Healthcare reported to Dr. Berry that access to hospital beds is opening back up. Right now there are only two people in our local hospital with COVID-19. Both were unvaccinated, according to Dr. Berry. Another individual is hospitalized out of county with COVID-19 symptoms. Jefferson Healthcare will now be able to start opening back up to individuals waiting for non-emergency procedures. Regionally, hospital beds are opening back up in Clallam County, too. But in Kitsap, hospitalizations are not decreasing, which makes transferring patients difficult for the more rural areas such as ours.

For healthcare workers and state government workers, yesterday was the last day to get a vaccination in order to be in compliance with Governor Jay Inslee's vaccine mandate in time. The proclamation requires all state employees, higher education, childcare, and K-12 education employees, and most health and long-term care providers to be fully vaccinated with a recommended COVID-19 vaccine by October 18. Dr. Berry didn't have numbers for our local hospital, but said that at the Olympic Medical Center in Port Angeles, as of last Friday, only 40 employees remained unvaccinated.

Now that it's October, we're entering cold and flu season and holiday travel season. According to Dr. Berry, both of those are a good reason to get vaccinated. Jefferson County's public health department has noticed a recent trend in COVID-19 transmission from out-of-county and out-of-state unvaccinated family and friends visiting Jefferson County and spreading COVID-19. Dr. Berry encouraged all community members to get vaccinated, wear a mask, and be more thoughtful about gatherings with people from out of town. Either make sure your visitors are vaccinated, or think about ways to gather more safely, such as outdoors by going on a hike or having an outdoor gathering.

Rapid tests are still a limited resource in Jefferson County. If you plan to go out of town for holiday travel, Dr. Berry said it could be extra protection to get a test before and after traveling. However, if you are unvaccinated, she recommends not traveling at all. As we enter cold and flu season, it's important to get your flu shot as well as your COVID-19 shot. But even if you're vaccinated, if you get sick, Dr. Berry suggests getting a COVID-19 test just in case, so that it's easier for the health department to do contact tracing.

At their meeting Monday morning, county commissioners proclaimed the first week of October as mental health awareness week. Representatives from Jefferson County's chapter of NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, highlighted the importance of focusing on mental health right now as we are in the second year of a global pandemic, in which people have been isolated and lost income and housing due to the shutdowns. According to Patrick Johnson, president of the NAMI board, the suicide rate in Jefferson County is 44 per 100,000. In the United States, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the country.

Our local NAMI chapter offers group and family classes for individuals needing help dealing with their mental health. You can find more information about what they do at <https://namijeffco.org/>. In our county, Discovery Behavioral Health (<https://www.discoverybh.org/>) offers crisis and emergency services as well as psychiatric services and family support services. If you're in crisis and need help, you can call the crisis line at 888-910-0416.

And that's it for today's local news. KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. I'm Lily Haight. Thanks for listening.