

Hello world, you are listening to KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Carmen Jaramillo with local news and commentary for January 4, 2022.

Last week's snow has mostly melted in Port Townsend and Port Hadlock but poor road conditions, ice and blackouts are still impacting southern parts of the county including Quilcene, Brinnon and the Coyle peninsula. Quilcene and Brinnon saw freezing rain and snow late Sunday which created white out conditions. Over 1,000 people lost power.

Road conditions on Center Road were clearing up Monday but at 11am, Highway 101 was closed south of Quilcene due to downed trees and powerlines. The highway was shut down from Hoodsport to Quilcene, isolating many south county residents and restricting travel to and from the peninsula. The highway remained closed last night as there was still much more work to do to clear the road, according to the state Department of Transportation. The PUD was asking residents in Brinnon to conserve water during the power outage as increased usage was threatening supply. A weather alert released Monday afternoon predicted up to an additional three inches of snowfall last night in Brinnon.

Temperatures are expected to stay mostly above freezing for the next week in Port Townsend, with the chance of more snow tonight and tomorrow in Brinnon and Quilcene. I've come across several stories of Brinnon residents trapped in their homes without power because of the snow and highway closure. Please check on your neighbors and make sure they are okay!

COVID-19 cases in Jefferson County, Washington State, and the country are exploding this week as the omicron wave begins at full force. Jefferson County Public Health reported 81 new cases of COVID-19 yesterday, bringing our total confirmed case count to 1,589. 124 cases are in active isolation and one person is hospitalized. This sharp increase has almost doubled our two-week case rate per 100,000 residents. Last week we clocked in at 214 cases per 100,000 residents, today we are at 416 cases per 100,000 residents.

Last week, the Washington State Department of Health reported it's highest ever increase in cases since the start of the pandemic with 6,888 cases in a single day. In the coming weeks we will most likely pass 10,000 Washington state residents dead from COVID-19. In her weekly COVID-19 briefing to the Board of County Commissioners yesterday, Dr. Allison Berry said that over the last two weeks cases in Washington State have increased 250%. Any new infection of COVID-19 locally is almost certainly the omicron variant, Berry said.

This dramatic surge in cases has put a strain both on the health department and on the hospital. Jefferson Healthcare CEO Mike Glenn told commissioners that while the hospital has so far been lucky to not have a large influx of COVID-positive patients requiring hospitalization, the hospital is still overwhelmed and not working at 100% capacity. They are seeing staffing shortages, supply shortages, increased testing, and increased patients in the express clinic and the emergency room.

Staffing shortages, which were already a problem, are being exacerbated by infections and isolations among hospital staff. Glenn said the hospital is operating on a skeleton crew across all departments and that in some instances there has only been one nurse available in a unit. In addition, the hospital is having a hard time discharging patients to other facilities across the state, resulting in patients taking up bed space and staff capacity that could be better utilized. Glenn said they expect the situation will only get worse as this wave continues.

Berry advised the public to take precautions to prevent infection now more than ever. If you are eligible for a booster shot, you should go out and get one because it will give the best protection from catching and spreading the omicron variant.

Berry said she has heard a lot of rhetoric that would imply that the omicron variant is not as severe as previous iterations of the virus and this is just not true. In reality the omicron variant, while less severe than delta, is still more severe than the first strain of COVID-19, which I think should be called OG COVID. If you are unvaccinated you can become severely ill and die from omicron, and even if you do not die, infections that could have been prevented will put even more strain on our hospital system. While a couple of months ago it might have been safe to host an indoor gathering with people who are all vaccinated, that is no longer the case. Berry said the safest indoor gathering is now one where everyone in attendance has had a booster shot and is wearing a mask. That is how infectious the omicron variant is.

Monday, the health department was overwhelmed with calls relating to the surge. Berry said there are now so many cases of the virus that the health department can no longer contact trace. The strategy now isn't prevention but damage mitigation, she said. If you have cold or flu symptoms, or know you were exposed visit <https://www.jeffersoncountypublichealth.org/202/Public-Health> for information on what to do.

That's all from me for today. KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and five PM Monday through Thursday and at noon on Friday and Saturday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. I'm Carmen Jaramillo. Thanks for listening.