

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Lily Haight with local news for February 23, 2022.

Jefferson County Public Health reported 42 new cases of COVID-19 yesterday. Because of the holiday weekend, this number represents the total cases counted between Friday, February 18 and yesterday, February 22. This brings our total case count, since the beginning of the pandemic, up to 2,990. There are currently 105 active cases in isolation and four Jefferson County residents are hospitalized. Deputy Health Officer Dr. Tom Locke said Tuesday that COVID-19 cases continue to drop across the country and on the Olympic Peninsula. In Jefferson County, Omicron activity is down 8% over the past two weeks, and our current case rate is at 618 per 100,000.

According to Locke, this is a turning point in the pandemic. Washington State will be lifting its statewide masking mandate on March 21. According to Locke, Jefferson County will lift its mandate at the same time. Health Officer Dr. Allison Berry earlier announced she will rescind the order requiring proof of vaccinations for restaurants and bars on March 11. Dr. Locke explained that we will always have some COVID-19 probably for the next several years. "How it behaves will have a lot more to do with the virus than anything else," he said. "As we look to the future, not only are new variations or variants possible, they're really to be expected. If we've learned anything from these last two waves, it's to expect the unexpected."

There is a new variant – called the BA2 variant – circulating now in the U.S. Dr. Locke warned that BA2 is not a harmless sub variant, and that it is more transmissible than Omicron. Currently, the World Health Organization classifies the BA2 variant as a "variant of concern" similar to Omicron. This leaves many worried about mask mandates lifting next month. Commissioner Kate Dean took to Facebook a few weeks ago to get a sense of the community's feelings around lifting the mask mandate. Her post received 122 comments – many expressed concern about it being too soon. However, some commenters pointed out that with the Omicron variant, most cloth masks were ineffective anyway and, with a shortage of N95s and KN95s, the masking effort wasn't doing much to prevent spread of the variant at all. Dr. Locke explained on Tuesday that now is the time for us to transition from emergency response to the pandemic, into a more sustainable and less disruptive response. Only time will tell whether or not our hospitals and health care facilities will be able to handle this transition, and what the next stage of this virus has in store for us.

As always, you can find the most up to date case information at the Jefferson County Public Health website (<https://www.jeffersoncountypublichealth.org/1466/Case-Information>) or the Jefferson County Government Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/jeffcowagov/>).

Olympic Community Action Programs – also known as OlyCAP – will be running its annual Point In Time count this Thursday, February 24. The Point In Time count is an annual event where housing advocates reach out to fellow community members who are homeless in order to get some solid statistics on how many of our community members are living outside in tents, in their cars, trailers, or at the homeless shelter. Getting an accurate count helps organizations like OlyCAP to receive the needed state and federal funding for their programs. It also helps homeless advocates to learn more about our houseless community members, and potentially get them in touch with services that could help, such as food stamps, housing vouchers, a hotel room, or access to a shelter. This year, OlyCAP volunteers will be helping people get vaccinated for COVID-19 if they wish to.

OlyCAP will be set up at the Port Townsend Welcoming Center located at Pope Marine Park, as well as the Brinnon, Tri-Area, and Quilcene community centers. Volunteers will be offering sleeping bags, food, pet food, coats, hand warmers, and personal hygiene goods.

If you're homeless, or if you know someone who is, and you'd like to be counted in the Point In Time count, go to one of these centers on February 24 or call OlyCAP at 360-385-2571 to get assistance. With the cold snap happening right now, it's a good time to reach out for help, either for yourself, or for someone you know, in order to stay warm and prevent hypothermia from sleeping outside or in uninsulated shelters like tents and cars.

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