

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Jim Burke, with local news for March 29, 2022.

Public Health Officer Dr. Allison Berry, and Department of Emergency Management Director Willie Bence both spoke with the Board of County Commissioners yesterday, and answered questions. Dr. Berry said "We are continuing to see a decrease in case rates, hospitalizations and deaths nationwide due to COVID-19, and for the first time since Thanksgiving we've lost less than a thousand Americans a day. But still a very high number: we lost 796 Americans yesterday and we've lost more than 970,000 to COVID-19."

There are early signs of uptick in some states where the BA 2 variant is appearing first. Cases in Washington are continuing to decline. She said, "In Jefferson County there have been 3,176 cases and the case rate remains in the low range at 65 per hundred thousand. We have one resident currently hospitalized for a total of 115 people hospitalized in this response, and we have lost 28 of our residents.... We have seen a recent increase in the total number of cases each day.... We do anticipate that the case rate will rise this week. Unclear if the case rate will go above that hundred cases per 100 thousand threshold."

"In neighboring Clallam County we've diagnosed 10,956 cases," she said. "Our case rate is 91 per hundred thousand. Two of our Clallam county citizens are currently hospitalized for a total of 359 hospitalizations and we've lost 111 of our citizens in Clallam County.... So locally we are seeing a little bit of a "bump" which was not unanticipated.... We expected cases would rise somewhat after we lifted masking requirements," she went on to say. "It's too early to say whether or not this is a small bump that will resolve, or if it's part of a larger trend like what we're seeing in some parts of the country that have been affected by BA 2 earlier. We have only diagnosed one case of BA 2 in our region, but of course only a small number of our viral samples are ever sequenced."

In Washington state as a whole the percentage of strains that are coming back positive for BA 2 is rising, currently at 28%. She said, "We do anticipate that BA 2 will overtake BA 1, which is the omicron strain responsible for the most recent surge.... BA 2 is a sub-variant of omicron that is actually more contagious than the original version., but is not, based on current estimates, more severe."

The other question she is getting most is whether we need a second booster or fourth dose of the vaccine and whether or when we might see a pediatric vaccine for children under age 5. Dr. Berry said, "The FDA is meeting on the 30th," [that's tomorrow] "which is the first time it will see a lot of data around both of these questions...early press releases about the data look promising."

THIS JUST IN: the FDA just authorized fourth doses(second boosters,) for all Americans over 50. Dr. Berry recommends that we all keep carrying a mask to put on in some indoor spaces; that not only are they required on public transit, but it is a very good idea to wear one in those settings.

There was a question about unmasking while singing in church. Dr. Berry said there are many variables, including the size of the space, the size of the congregation, the ages of the congregants, and the ventilation in the space as well. She said that singing is one of the best ways to spread COVID-19 while unmasked, and said that when we get to a very low case rate – that is, less than 50 cases per hundred thousand – it would be a good time to unmask and sing indoors in large groups.

Willie Bence wanted to remind everyone that if you need a vaccine and can't leave the house to get one, you can still call the hotline at the Emergency Operations Center so that they can come to you to deliver a vaccine. Their hotline number is 360-385-9369.

You can listen to Dr. Berry's and Willie Bence's full remarks and answers to questions at <https://kptz.org/2022/03/28/county-public-health-report-3-28-22/>. You can submit your Public Health questions to Dr. Allison Berry and Willie Bence by emailing contactus@kptz.org. Just be sure to email before Friday at noon, to be answered at the following Monday's BOCC meeting.

The City of Port Townsend will host an open house at the Cotton Building (607 Water Street) on March 29 (that's this afternoon) from 4:30pm–6pm to allow members of the public to learn and provide feedback about possible long-term streateries and parklets in Port Townsend. There is still time to participate in the “streateries survey.” The PT City Council hopes to get public input this month, formulate new rules about the street cafes and create a permanent rule by the beginning of May. There is a link on the transcript of this program to access the survey (<https://mailchi.mp/24c931825300/streatery-input-needed-please-take-this-survey>).

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and five Monday through Thursday and at noon on Friday and Saturday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. This is Jim Burke. Thank you for listening, and have a good Tuesday.