

BOS update 8/19/21

Humboldt County continues to see a COVID-19 surge fueled by the more contagious and faster spreading Delta variant that has yet to show signs of decreasing. There are early signs of a plateau, however, which is encouraging. For the first time in one month the case count per 100k has not continue to rise at dramatic rates week by week. As can be seen in the accompanying graph, this week's case count for unvaccinated topped at just over 70/100k, and for the fully vaccinated there was a slight decline for the first time since the surge began. For now, we should remain vigilant until real decrease is seen in both cases and hospitalizations.

Hospitalizations, which lag case counts by several weeks, have not yet plateaued, and the hospital impact is being felt severely by our local healthcare workers. Many critically ill residents have been transferred out of county due to lack of bed space in our local ICUs. Plans have been in works for weeks at increasing staffing in the hospitals, but due to significant staffing shortages across the state and the US, so far, no increase in staffing has been secured as of the time of this report. Humboldt's ICU capacity has been near or at 100% for most of the past 2 weeks. This continues to be half or more COVID-19 patients and has thus resulted in cancellation of many needed procedures that were deemed not emergencies, but still very needed by member of our community. The types of care that become deferred by the hospital during a surge of this type include things such as heart surgeries, cancer surgeries, joint and back surgeries. Sometimes these are surgeries that were already put off by weeks or months due to previous COVID impacts on the healthcare system.

We have also seen an increase trend toward younger and younger hospitalizations, likely since this is the group with the lowest vaccination rates in our county. Public health continues to message on prevention of COVID-19 by wearing masks, avoiding crowds and gatherings, and getting vaccinated. With schools starting again across Humboldt County, vaccination against COVID-19 for anyone 12+ is the best tool we have to keep schools and businesses open and reduce COVID-19 impact on the hospitals.

Vaccination efforts have increased over the past few weeks for the first time since June 15th reopening, with most vaccines given in past weeks being first doses. While increases have been small, new requirements for vaccination in healthcare and education should start to increase vaccination rates even more in the coming weeks. Our mobile Snap Nurse team continues to work throughout the county at events, organizations, places of business, schools who are willing to host vaccination events. Additionally, vaccines continue to be available at many pharmacies, hospitals, and some primary care providers. The announcement of a 3rd vaccine in the series for Moderna and Pfizer for a small portion of the population should not have significant impact on supply for now, as only about 3% of people are estimated to be in the "severely immunocompromised" population approved by the FDA currently. FDA is looking to potentially approve a 3rd dose for many more people in the coming weeks, and Humboldt County Public Health is watching closely so we can plan for any larger increase in demand by coordinating resources for delivery and supply of newly approved 3rd doses. Full FDA approval for Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine is expected within the next month as well. Approval for COVID-19 vaccine for those under the age of 12 is not expected until later in the year or early 2022 unless significant changes are made to the current timeline for FDA approval in this age group.

Testing capacity in the county was very strained in the past month with the swift rise in cases due to the Delta surge. There is evidence that testing capacity is improving with increased capacity at Optum fixed site in Eureka and return of the mobile Optum sites in Garberville, Arcata, McKinleyville, Fortuna and Hoopa. We have also had a Snap Nurse rapid response testing team for the past few weeks who have been going to businesses or geographic areas of significant outbreak of COVID-19 in Humboldt County. This team does rapid tests and sends a confirmation PCR test to the state lab if needed. This team will be demobilized back to the state when there is a decrease need for outbreak response with the current surge.

Testing has increased in many businesses and organizations through the state-based testing partnership (<https://testing.covid19.ca.gov/get-started/>). Many schools have signed up for testing, some looking to help test the community as well. It is expected that testing with rapid tests will continue to expand in the coming weeks both in businesses, schools, and in healthcare. Testing done through the state-program above, through a healthcare facility, or an Optum state testing site is reported to the state disease monitoring system (CalREDIE) that then gets reported to the local health department. Home tests are not reported to public health, and there is no current way to report or records positive home tests unless done through an online proctored exam that some companies offer. Otherwise, if documentation is needed for a home test, the current recommendation would be to seek out a new test that will report to the state reporting system.

COVID-19 has proven to be a formidable opponent, and it is safe to say everyone is exhausted. Everyone has suffered losses, whether directly or indirectly, over the past 18 months. What has been evident, however, is the community's ability to pull together and quickly make new plans when COVID-19 throws something new our way. We at Public Health greatly appreciate the community's ability to react quickly as things change quickly, and to offer to protect yourself and your community by doing the things needed to end this pandemic sooner. For now, until the end of this current surge, please continue to mask, avoid large gatherings, test, and get vaccinated.