

Del Norte County sees new testing provider, vaccination option

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Del Norte County is beginning to see new options for both COVID-19 testing and vaccinations.

On the testing front, Public Health Officer Dr. Warren Rehwaldt said the county now has access to a new mobile testing unit, provided by the state.

“Our testing has seen a bit of an amplification this last couple weeks since I reported to you last,” Rehwaldt told the county board of supervisors during its meeting Tuesday.

That amplification is coming from a new testing provider: OptumServe, sponsored by the state, launched in the county last week. The testing comes in a mobile unit, which looks like a food truck with blue and orange designs, according to Rehwaldt.

The truck can offer around 80 COVID-19 tests each day — and Rehwaldt said the county needs to use them, or risk losing them.

“It’s very clear from the state that it’s a precious resource for them, and if we don’t find the utility of it here, if we don’t show that we need it and we’re going to use it, they’re going to pack that bus up and send it off somewhere else,” he told supervisors.

Testing can now take place at the truck five days a week, including one day in Smith River, one in Klamath and three in Crescent City. Online registration for testing is required, and is available at lhi.care/covidtesting, or by calling 888-634-1123.

Rehwaldt hopes the site can eventually be used to administer vaccines, once the county’s supply is great enough to bring them more directly into the community.

On the vaccine front, Rehwaldt said the county has begun to see doses coming in through the federal pharmacy program. Rite Aid in Crescent City has received around 1,200 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which Rehwaldt said is a big boost.

“Huge boon to the community to have Rite Aid up and running like that, and getting that kind of supply. We’re really happy to see that,” he said Tuesday. “The biggest news for our county has been the stepping up of Rite Aid, and the fact that they became a distribution site through the Rite Aid chain. Because that kind of volume of vaccine is huge for us, for a county our size it’s really helped a lot.”

Those doses don’t move through the county, and instead come directly through the federal government, Rehwaldt said the pharmacy is following the state’s vaccine eligibility program. Appointments can be made online at riteaid.com/california.

The county has also held a handful of vaccination clinics, including at the airport. Rehwaldt said public health is hoping to move those clinics to the fairgrounds in hopes of reducing the number of volunteers necessary to run a clinic.

In general, Rehwaldt painted a positive picture of the status of the pandemic in Del Norte County.

“Overall I’d say that our situation is pretty good. We’re continuing to do vaccinations for COVID which is a good thing. I think we’re going to hold in the red tier, which is also a good thing,” Rehwaldt said.

Still, he noted that the county is continuing to see cases of the virus reported across the county.

According to public health data, Del Norte County reported 31 active cases of the virus March 8, compared to 28 on March 1 and 36 on Feb. 22. That’s still down from the county’s highs in December and January.

“Case numbers could be better, could be dramatically worse. I’d like to see more of a downward trend in our case numbers, but we are seeing a lot of days with multiple reports, and some days with very few. So hopefully that’s a trend that we’ll continue heading towards few reports,” Rehwaldt said.

Rehwaldt’s also optimistic about the possible impact of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which was recently approved by federal regulators. He said the county has received a few doses, and expects to receive more in the future.

“This is logistically easier, because it’s refrigerateable, so you can take it around with you in a refrigerator cooler,” Rehwaldt said. “You don’t have try and rush to get everybody done before the vaccine time window wears out.”

The vaccines do have lower general efficacy rates than the other versions already on the market — but Rehwaldt said the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is just as effective as preventing critical cases of COVID-19, hospitalizations, and deaths.

“The take-home is, if you get the opportunity to get vaccinated, get vaccinated with whatever is available, because they all do the job,” he said.