

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with local news and commentary for Thursday, July 16, 2020.

Like much of the country, COVID-19 cases in Jefferson County continue to rise. We've seen five new cases in the last few days, bringing the county-wide total to 49.

Four of the newly reported cases are members of the same family, all between 10 and 19 years old, where two others have also tested positive. This reflects a trend toward household transmissions, with group get-togethers a common place for virus transmission. So it's best to be cautious, even around family members who have potentially faced exposure.

The fifth reported case is for a person in their 50s who is unrelated to the family.

As of Wednesday, 3,926 local residents have been tested with 3,883 testing negative. Forty four people are awaiting results. Sixteen of the 49 cases have not yet recovered from the virus. The gender ratio is 53% female to 47% male.

You've heard this before, how wearing a mask is necessary to prevent the virus' spread. The head of the CDC has said that if everyone – that's every on of us – wore masks in public the virus would be contained in a month. This is muddled a bit by information coming out of the administration with an opposing view.

Unlike many other parts of the country, the local governmental administrative branch is not attacking the credibility of the health department.

Jefferson County Health Officer Dr. Thomas Locke, who has become the most recognizable county official in recent months, offered some insights about masks.

Locke said that face shields are not adequate mask substitutes as they don't adequately stop the release of the respiratory aerosols that are suspected to be a significant source of COVID-19 transmission. And while there are some legitimate reasons that some people can't wear masks, they are uncommon. There is a big difference between not wanting or liking to wear a mask and not being medically able to do so. There are no recognized medical conditions that prevent mask use. Asthma, allergies, chronic lung disease, and heart disease are not legitimate reasons to go barefaced.

Given the unfortunate politicization of this issue, we are seeing significant abuse of this "medical exemption" clause, according to Locke. Under current masking mandates business owners are required to respect a customer's allegation that they cannot wear a mask, although with no obligation to allow them into the place of business. When this occurs they should accommodate the customer by offering curbside service or home delivery.

Kroger, the owner of the local QFC stores in Port Townsend and Port Hadlock, is the latest large corporation to require masks in all their stores, This requirement begins next Wednesday, July 22, but a majority of local shoppers are already following the guidelines.

A panel of jurors has been selected for the first trial under the new COVID restrictions at the Jefferson County Courthouse, for a trial of a man charged with two counts of first-degree rape of a child and first degree child molestation.

According to Superior Court Administrator Sophie Nordstrom, all has gone smoothly aside from a few minor issues with numbering, it has all gone smoothly.

The physical courtroom was reconfigured to adhere to new pandemic regulations of social distancing. The jurors have expressed satisfaction with the new safety measures, according to Nordstrom.

Finally, the county mailed out ballots for the August 4 primary election yesterday. Voters should receive their ballots within a week. If this does not occur they should contact the auditor's office. There is plenty of time to rectify any problem before the ballots are due two and a half weeks from now.

For those who believe the mail is not a secure voting conduit, drop boxes are available in six locations throughout the county in Port Townsend, Port Hadlock, Quilcene, Brinnon and Nordland.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news at kptz.org.

This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.