

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with local news and commentary for Thursday, January 21, 2021.

Jefferson County reported five new cases of COVID-19 this week, bringing the total to 274. As of Thursday, 31 people are awaiting test results. Twelve cases are now in isolation, down from 20 just a few days ago.

Vaccination has gotten closer to reality, even though when individuals can get their shot is still up in the air. This week the state lowered the eligibility age to 65, allowing screening on the findyourphsewa.org web site. Once cleared, the site now tells us there are two active vaccination sites in Jefferson County, Jefferson Healthcare and the Port Townsend Safeway. Clicking on the link leads us to the hospital website, where they are only accepting appointments for those over 75.

Also eligible are those 50 and older who live in multigenerational households that include persons over 80. Or maybe that will be readjusted to 75.

As a clarification, the site reports that the hospital does not have enough vaccine to accommodate the young-uns. As Jefferson County is the oldest county in the state with more than a third of the population qualifying for Medicare, it is imperative to immunize our oldest and most vulnerable community members first. Starting with the oldest population protects the most at risk for hospitalization and death from COVID-19, according to the web site.

Those over 75 can now schedule appointments by calling a dedicated line at the Department of Emergency Management 360-344-9791 between 9am and 4pm weekdays, although if you call in the middle of the day you could be on hold for an hour or more.

As for Safeway, there are no available appointments during the first Biden term, according to the web site's scheduler.

Newly inaugurated President Joe Biden has promised to ramp up the vaccination process, so they could soon arrive at a pharmacy near you. Health officials are asking people to be patient and wait their turn, regular checking state and hospital websites for the latest information. And we'll keep you informed about eligibility changes here on KPTZ.

Still, we are seemingly ahead of the flattening curve. The *Seattle Times* reported yesterday that Jefferson County ranks fourth for total vaccine doses, with 655 doses distributed for every 10,000 residents.

Governor Jay Inslee's proposal to replace local health departments with a statewide agency is now under discussion in the state legislature. The matter has already created controversy, with specific opposition from Jefferson County officials. This reorganization will involve the creation of regional public health districts with newly configured governing boards and district health officers employed by Washington State. Funding for the system would come from a tax imposed on health insurance premiums.

So County Health Officer Dr. Tom Locke, Jefferson County's own Anthony Fauci, could be reassigned. This would disrupt a system that is already functioning well, according to those opposed to the action.

Locke, along with District One Commissioner Kate Dean, is serving on a Washington Association of Counties taskforce that is leading the response to the regionalization proposal. Both will provide an update to the Jefferson County Board of Health at a virtual meeting this afternoon. Locke and Dean have already provided input to the state about the proposal, but these suggestions have been so far ignored.

The following bears repeating: Contact tracers are at work contacting people with potential exposure to the virus. These days we often ignore calls from an unfamiliar number, but we need to pay a bit more attention since the calls don't appear to originate from the hospital. So if you don't want to pick up a call from an unfamiliar number, check voice mail shortly afterwards. Contact tracers are leaving messages, but they aren't calling back, according to Dr. Locke.

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@kptz.org.

This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.