Gov Scott

- Trends continue moving in the right direction – he’s very encouraged
- So focusing his comments on other items – workforce especially career tech programs and upgrading CTE centers
- Mental health advocacy day was yesterday – thank you to mental health professionals who have stepped up over past 2 years

Commissioner Pieciak

- Trends down 36% over country over past 7 days – trends that started in New England have now spread more widely – expect to see nationwide improvement over the coming weeks
- Cases 44% down over region, hospitalization down 20%
- VT cases mirror these trends - down 40% last week, 56% over 2 weeks
- New average 672 cases/day
- Demand for testing slightly down 21% but positivity rate also coming down
- VT case increases and decreases largely mirror the regional trend
- LTC cases not seeing improvement yet – now up to 515 cases
- Forecast predicts cases to continue to come down through February
- Hospitalizations – new admissions starting to trend down, down about 10% over last week; overall hospitalizations down 5% – so expect to see overall trends come down after that – just starting to see this improvement
- Bed availability relatively stable (54 med-surg beds, 27 ICU beds)
- More fatalities this week – so far 62 for January – ties for January
- Highest with those who are older (65+) and not fully vaccinated and boosted
- Forecast in fatalities expected to improve in February
- VT continues to add 1000s of Vermonters each week who are boosted

Sec French

- Continue to update FAQ documents on testing in schools – resources available at https://education.vermont.gov/covid19/testing
- Added new definition of “presumptive contacts” – those who shared a classroom but not those on a bus or cafeteria – different than contact tracing to determine someone who had been within 3-6” and less labor intensive – those now get antigen tests
- VT is the national leader in student vaccination and will also go a long way to protecting student and keep schools open
- 6 schools have applied for student vaccination grant program for being over 80% vaccination and 4 have first been awarded:
  - Crossett Brook (87%)
  - Harwood HS (87%)
  - GM Valley School (100%)
  - Opal Valley school (89%)
- Will continue to assess vaccination rates and publish vaccination rates
Now we need to shift to measuring academic risks and academic recovery – expect to shift efforts beginning at end of February 1, 2022

Jenney Samuelson, AHS

• This week focusing on impacts on the mental health impacts of the pandemic from isolation, long work hours, unpredictability, etc
• Deaths from overdose and suicide have increased
• Younger Vermonters in particular are struggling – must provide children, youth, older Vermonters with the stability, support, engagement they need to live their lives – mental health will be front and center as we move to recovery
• 57% of Vermonters are “Up to Date”
• Doing more distribution of masks, antigen tests to organizations who serve at risk populations
• Looking at getting additional rapid test into VT as we maintain our PCR testing program; can also still order through fed program
• Hospitals are stabilizing – reporting fewer staff absent than last year
• Continuing area of focus on moving Vermonters w. MH needs out of EDs and into in-patient beds
• Continuing work to open subacute beds to relieve pressure on hospitals
• 123 TLC staff and National Guard staff
• Staff in hospitals and health care system are still under strain

Mark Levine

• Booster shots: more data from CDC study about how important they are – case and mortality rates improved for those boosted
• Our future with COVID – may feel like we are repeating cycles over and over – but we have moved forward – planning for a new phase of living with the virus
• Moving more towards endemic – we live with it and it is less disruptive, more like the flu
• Goals will continue to focus on capacity of health care system and those at high risk
• May not rely on daily case counts and % positivity but more reliance on wastewater surveillance and surveillance in highest risk settings
• Testing and treatment for those at highest risk
• Focus on recovery in areas like health behaviors, health “debt”, substance use, mental health, eating disorders
• Moving to dashboard being updated only on weekdays
• B.A.2 variant – more transmissible variant of Omicron but does not appear more severe – 1 case identified in VT
• Moderna granted full approval by FDA
Questions and Answer:

Transition in endemic – what point do we look to in hospitalization to know we can move more to normal?
Scott: it’s not just looking at hospitalization but all the data – right now feeling good about what direction we are going in; ML: it’s really the trend data and not one number in particular – can’t just set a metric

Do we know how many N95 masks we will be getting and where they will be going?
Jenney: there will be 400m nationally – no specific timeline – they will be in pharmacies and other locations – more info to come from federal government

How do we plan to measure how many people impacted by mental health issues?
Jenney: DMH collects data on an ongoing basis and will continue to do this, compare pre to post pandemic
French: will continue to work with legislature, districts about use of ESSER federal funds and how they can address things like mental health and academic recovery

Are we considering calling in National Guard to help with schools?
French: must acknowledge we are facing a lot of staffing issues and these can cause school closures and test to stay won’t fix them all, right now not planning to pull Guard in – they have focused on health care

Will state continue widespread availability of PCR testing?
Jenney: we will continue to offer PCR testing across the state for Vermonters who want to be tested, especially those who are symptomatic and may not have access to rapid tests; we will see PCR surveillance testing in schools taper off; we do not recommend ongoing asymptomatic testing with PCR;
ML: we will see increased reliance on rapid tests for symptomatic and asymptomatic testing while we have a lot of virus around and as we get more access to the tests; we will re-evaluate recommendations again when we have low prevalence of the virus

Does this mean that only 6 schools have met 80% vaccination rate? This is also the threshold for taking off masks.
French: these are only schools that have met the incentive grant – this is not the broader number who may have met this goal – tried a survey a few months ago when schools were overwhelmed and did not get great data, now working to try to intersect DOE registration data with VDH vaccine administration – should have statewide reporting on vaccination rates soon; correct that there will be variability in student vaccination rate between schools that we will want to focus on

Has this influenced thinking of a student mandate for vaccines as requirement for school attendance?
French: would not connect the two conversations yet – will have better insights into the data soon – its about how we support the districts in meeting resources needed to increase vaccines; they are in the process in convening a meeting of the vaccine advisory group to provide more feedback on
vaccine mandate – DOE is part of that group; Scott – also mindful that vaccination rates are lower the younger the students

**Changes to case dashboard, does this mean more about redeploying VDH resources?**
Mark: there is a lot of other work that VDH does – chronic disease, communicable diseases, environmental issues, etc – these have been ongoing but want to get back to a time where we can focus on these to greater extent; not changing case dashboard or measuring cases just not updating over the weekend

**Is it time to get back to normal in-person visitation at corrections?**
Scott: yes, I think so, as soon as possible, but needs to talk to commissioner of corrections

**Critics of S.30 say they make hospitals more vulnerable to mass shootings; what does he think about a veto?**
We need to continue to evolve with the existing laws we have, make improvements there if necessary, and use those tools, rather than make new laws. He doesn’t think we need to change any of our laws at this point in time but he will look at the final bill and give more definitive answer. At this point in time he is not in favor of changing any more gun laws.

**How is rapid test reporting go?**
Have gotten about 6000 positive results reported that way – about 12,000 negative – expect that is not the full number but thanks VTers who are reporting – that’s a good number