

AN OPEN LETTER TO FIFTH DISTRICT CONSTITUENTS ABOUT COVID-19 MASKING MANDATES IN L.A. COUNTY

Tomorrow, our Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will receive its weekly COVID-19 update from the Department of Public Health. It will undoubtedly include discussion of a forthcoming masking mandate from the County's Health Officer, to be implemented at the end of this week. I want to share my perspective in respect to masking mandates in our County, so that my constituents clearly understand my position as a policy maker, public health advocate, and executive leader.

It's clear that COVID-19, for the foreseeable future, is here to stay. We are learning to live through its countless mutations, spikes in infections, and corresponding strains on our hospitals and workforce. In order to maintain consistency and public trust, I remain committed to advocating for our County to remain aligned with the state's COVID-19 public health policies.

The current COVID-19 wave is different from other ones: many people are getting infected, but the majority are not becoming seriously ill. I believe this is partly because we've made great progress in getting vaccines and therapeutics to our L.A. County residents. I wholeheartedly believe that vaccines, boosters, and access to COVID-19 treatments are our most effective tools to battle COVID-19 and save lives. To prove this point, a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found that among individuals 50 and older, those unvaccinated are 29 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than those fully vaccinated and double-boosted.

To be clear, if you haven't gotten a vaccine in the last six months or in the year 2022, get one now. This is lifesaving and data-backed advice from public health professionals that I support.

However, I have not seen any empirical data that conclusively shows that masking mandates make a difference in decreasing or stopping COVID-19 transmission rates. An analysis of Alameda County's June 2022 masking mandate, in fact, concluded it had no significant impact in comparison to its surrounding counties that did not impose a masking mandate. Alameda County dropped this mandate after only three weeks. July 25, 2022 Page 2 What I have seen, time and time again, is that masking mandates actually distract our collective efforts to decrease COVID-19 infection rates. I believe masking mandates are polarizing and are unenforceable. I also believe we have not fully examined nor understand the costs associated with imposing masking mandates among our children and youth. I've heard loud and clear from parents and caregivers who are witnessing the social emotional toll our County's children are shouldering. Their anxiety and depression are palpable.

Some believe that imposing masking mandates are part of a strategy that will create equity in a County as big and diverse as ours. I disagree. Certainly, COVID-19 has forced us to take our blinders off and face the disparate health outcomes that afflict our poor communities. I've worked hard to help communities of color improve their healthcare outcomes during my 30 years in public service. But masking mandates will not make a meaningful improvement to the underlying systemic healthcare inequities that are the true drivers of inequitable rates of COVID-19 deaths and long-term, negative effects.

Lastly, I'd like to clarify that I am not against using masks. I believe "masking-up" makes a lot of sense for individuals who want or need an extra layer of protection. I support our current COVID-19 public health masking policies, which require their use while using public transportation, in hospitals, homeless

shelters and jails. However, imposing a onesize-fits-all masking mandate now for all is not something I can or will support.

As I've said countless times, to effectively fight the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate its effects, we need clarity and consistency. This means trusting the public to make personal COVID-19 prevention decisions to keep themselves and their loved ones safe, promoting the efficacy of vaccines and boosters, and investing in equitable access to COVID-19 treatments.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent you. As always, if you would like to share your thoughts or reactions to this letter, I am just an email (kathryn@bos.lacounty.gov) away.

Sincerely,

KATHRYN BARGER

Supervisor, Fifth District