

FROM THE COVER

Frustration, acceptance over mask guidance

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of the highest vaccinated rates in the country, but our region, along with L.A. County, is unique across the country in recommending masks,” Richardson continued. “I thought we were the ‘Follow the science’ state?”

The shift in guidance from seven Bay Area counties — Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, San Francisco and Sonoma — comes just a month after California triumphantly reopened and was spurred by concerns that it’s impossible to tell unvaccinated from vaccinated residents in a mask-free situation.

At a Safeway in Menlo Park — where staff never stopped wearing masks — a little over three-quarters of shoppers had donned face coverings. Some said they never stopped wearing them, some didn’t mind putting them back on, and some said they really wear masks only because of the social pressure.

Those not wearing masks either hadn’t heard about the new guidance or said they felt safe because they were vaccinated. Some had simply fallen out of the habit.

The dissonance between feeling that the worst of the pandemic is over and the reinstatement of preventive measures might lead to confusion and frustration, according to Ashley Virtue, a spokesperson for the National Conflict Resolution Center.

“I think that with the rules changing, just as has happened throughout the pandemic, you will see some people in conflict because they feel like they’ve adjusted to one set of rules and then they found out that something different has happened,” she said.

Or, as Bay Area resident and Public Policy Institute of California

“I’m a little worried that people’s nerves are so frayed, they’re so fatigued. I’m worried about people getting really upset with each other.”

Angela Drake, a clinical psychologist at UC Davis



Salgu Wissmath / Special to The Chronicle

Thomas Gammer browses in a mask at Avid Reader in Davis. Yolo County recommends masks indoors.

President Mark Baldassare put it, it’s that feeling of “here we go again.”

Baldassare said he thinks that most vaccinated Californians will be willing to wear masks again, especially because so many interact with the unvaccinated every day, whether it’s children, people with compromised immune systems or those who aren’t comfortable with vaccines.

Nonetheless, it will seem to many that things are going backward, he said. In a May public opinion survey, Baldassare’s institute found that 86% of Californians believed that “when it comes to the pandemic, the worst is behind us.”

As of last week, six Bay Area counties had fully vaccinated at least 70% of residents 12 and older — more than Los Angeles County, which had vaccinated just under 60% of that

same group. Only Solano County — which, along with Napa County, did not join the rest of the Bay Area in recommending indoor masks for all — lags behind Los Angeles, with 56% of residents over 12 vaccinated.

Some also feared that the change in recommendations could signal that the vaccines do not work well — when the opposite is true. Health experts stress that vaccines are hugely effective, and indeed the Bay Area’s relatively high vaccination rates are helping keep the virus in check.

Even though it’s possible for vaccinated people to experience breakthrough coronavirus infections on rare occasions, they are much less likely to contract severe disease than the unvaccinated, who are at enormous risk from the delta variant, which Los Angeles County public health officials blamed for a rapid spike in new infections and deaths since the July Fourth holiday.

Outside the Bay Area, some shrugged off the new-old directives.

Davis resident Jill Hosseini, 35, said the new mask recommendations — which were also issued by Yolo, Sacramento and Fresno counties — don’t change much for her family. She and her husband continue to wear masks, despite

being vaccinated, as an example for her daughters, ages 5 and 6, who cannot yet be vaccinated.

“It feels safer for my kids because I can’t trust knowing if people are vaccinated indoors,” she said. “To me, it’s such an easy thing to do.”

At Avid Reader bookstore in Davis, employees have continued to wear masks, and so have the majority of their customers, said co-owner Erin Arnold. The priority, she said, has been “doing things the right way, doing things according to science,” and providing “a safe place for our community.”

In other parts of the state, masking requirements were more controversial. Los Angeles County went further than the Bay Area, enacting an indoor mask mandate for everyone that took effect Saturday night. But L.A.’s sheriff said Friday that his department would not enforce the county’s mandate and instead asked for voluntary compliance.

“Forcing the vaccinated and those who already contracted COVID-19 to wear masks indoors is not backed by science and contradicts the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines,” Sheriff Alex Villanueva wrote in a statement.

In May, the CDC said that fully vaccinated

people do not need to wear masks in most indoor settings. California’s Department of Public Health followed suit a month later. Both maintain those guidelines.

Angela Drake, a clinical psychologist at UC Davis, said she’s worried that the roller coaster of emotions brought out by the different phases of the pandemic — from depression during its peak to elation when things started to reopen — will cause increased conflict with the latest backtrack.

“I’m a little worried that people’s nerves are so frayed, they’re so fatigued,” she said. “I’m worried about people getting really upset with each other.”

She urged people to summon empathy for each other.

“This isn’t the time to go up to somebody and scream at them about whether they have a mask on,” she said. “If you see somebody without a mask, it’s not your business.”

Public feelings about masks could also spill into September’s recall election, one political consultant said.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has not yet commented on counties’ changing mask rules or guidance. But he made himself the face of California’s pandemic response, said Robin Swanson, a Democratic political consultant. Many voters may not draw a distinction between

local actions and those taken by the governor, she said, which could pose a problem for Newsom if there is widespread backlash.

Several of the top Republican candidates running to replace him are already trying to make the Los Angeles County mandate an issue in the race. Former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer called on Newsom to overrule the order, and Assembly Member Kevin Kiley, R-Rocklin (Placer County), said he would immediately terminate California’s coronavirus state of emergency, the legal basis for many pandemic restrictions, if elected.

Swanson counseled Newsom to “stay the course through choppy waters.” She said another surge in deaths from the coronavirus — especially if it necessitates a third round of lockdowns — would have far more dire political consequences than a mask requirement.

John Swartzberg, an infectious disease expert at UC Berkeley, said he hopes the new guidance will persuade vaccine holdouts to finally get inoculated against COVID.

“I’ve been dismayed by seeing the really dramatic drop-off in the number of people getting vaccinated,” he said, adding that going unvaccinated also creates the potential for new variants to develop.

He said that if the new mask guidance doesn’t work and cases continue to rise, a mask mandate could be on the horizon.

“I know the public health officers,” he said. “They’re going to be waking up every morning, looking at the data, talking to each other and trying to make the best decision possible for safety.”

If there is a mandate, Richardson, the Pleasanton resident, says he’ll go back to wearing a mask. But he’s not sure it’s doing anything.

“It just seems like virtue signaling,” he said.

San Francisco Chronicle staff writers Kellie Hwang, Julie Johnson and Alexei Koseff contributed to this report.

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