

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County response to COVID-19, April 3, 2020, Press Briefing

Dave Somers:

Thanks for joining us. I was thinking back. It wasn't very long ago, just a few weeks, none of us had heard of COVID-19 or thought much about coronaviruses. But here we are, businesses are mostly shut down. I know many of you are without employment and struggling or businesses were struggling or going to shut down. I know these are really tough times. And we've just got to really all stick together and support each other.

So, the bad news is the governor announced an extension of the stay at home order until May 4, another four weeks. The good news is, though, is that there's many indications that these efforts and the sacrifices you all are making are really helping flatten the curve. Our medical facilities are functioning well. We have not seen a surge that is causing them to really be beyond their capacity to handle. So things are going well and this is exactly the reason we're taking these measures. We know you're struggling. We're working hard in Snohomish County to really start to think about recovery. But we've got to keep doing what we're doing. Stay at home unless you need to. Take care of yourselves also. Get outside and take a walk. Keep your social distancing that's exactly what we need to do now. So a couple of things. We are standing up an economic sustainability and recovery task force in Snohomish County. I'll have more information on that next week but we're already starting planning on how we make sure that we're putting our best foot forward as we come out of this virus to get businesses back up and running.

We have asked for businesses around the county to assist in providing protective equipment and we have some companies in the county that are actually focusing their efforts on producing that kind of material and being helpful. So just thank you to everybody about that. Any businesses that have PPE, or personal protective equipment, please let us know. There's a place on her website to find out where to bring up those materials so we can get them to our medical professionals.

And also wanted to mention that later today will be standing up a chat bot on our website. We've developed that in partnership with Microsoft and Zammo. And this is to make information available to our residents 24-7, connect you with resources and information. It's really an amazing tool and we're really proud of that partnership again with Microsoft and Zammo and thank them. This is very innovative and I don't believe there's another like this anywhere. So with that I just say be well, take care of yourself, take care of your families and friends, and we'll get through this together. We're here to support you as best we can and will continue in those efforts.

And so with that, I'll just turn it over to Dr. Spitters.

Dr. Spitters:

Thank you, Executive Somers. Good morning, everyone. This morning, I'd like to share new case counts for Snohomish County with respect to COVID-19, updates on long term care facilities, and highlight some of the activities our staff have been doing to support homeless shelters and food banks. First, I'd like to cover the new case details. As of 8:30 this morning, we have a total of 1,495 reported cases of COVID-19 in Snohomish County residents since the beginning of the outbreak. Among the cases for which interviews have been completed, 12% are hospitalized, 12% remain isolated at home or in a long term care facility, and 80% have completed their isolation period. That doesn't quite add up to 100%

because I'm rounding figures. So the latter figure's probably in the high 70s, actually. As we mentioned daily, a small proportion of individuals have succumbed to the infection, 41 deaths or just about two and a half percent to date, these numbers of course change daily and sometimes within the day. So what I just quoted to you might change even between now and our posting this afternoon at 2 p.m.

I'd also like to point out that starting with this afternoon's data update, we will no longer list individual deaths by age and gender. We will begin sharing aggregated demographic information such as gender and age by decade.

Turning to long term care facilities, we have 20 facilities with either a patient or staff member, or both, that has been confirmed to have COVID-19. We have another five facilities with pending results on either staff or patients with symptoms suggestive of COVID and test results pending.

They are still just two facilities would more than five cases each. Those are Josephine Caring Community and Stanwood and Sunrise View in Everett, now with 21 and 31 cases, respectively. The growing number of facilities with cases remains one of the health district's top priorities in terms of control and prevention of transmission. We continue to work with federal, state and local partners to establish broader surveillance and outreach for these high risk facilities, particularly focusing on those with at least one confirmed case.

We are also working closely with the Department of Social and Health Services and staffing agencies to ensure that these facilities have adequate care providers for their residents. However, none of this prevents medical directors from pursuing testing through their usual clinical laboratory at their clinical judgment, so the health district is not taking an active role in determining who does and doesn't get tested. Certainly if we see or hear about a situation where someone ought to be tested, we will make that recommendation, but the trigger and execution of that is through the health care providers within the facility. We want to continue to emphasize that long term care facilities need to be proactive and transparent and they should not wait for multiple people to become symptomatic. In general, at this point in time, any febrile respiratory illness, fever with cough or difficulty breathing, should be assumed to be COVID-19 until proven otherwise and appropriate testing and infection prevention measures should be instituted while those results are pending.

I also want to share a couple of ways that our staff have been working to support our shelters and food banks. Food, first of all, has not been identified as a likely source of COVID-19 transmission at this time. However, following current food safety standards will help protect volunteers and clients. Our staff have been actively working with Hunger Relief and hot meal Coalitions in Everett, Edmonds, Arlington Snohomish, Lake Stevens and Lynnwood. We've also been sharing fact sheets and guidance with food pantries, meal programs, and food establishments. We have encouraged alternative distribution methods such as drive through operations or pre-packaged materials ready for pickup. And we've also shared information with food establishments in Snohomish County on how they can safely donate leftover food to food banks.

Two final notes to mention, just an update on the testing that's occurred through the health district's drive through site averaging almost 200, 175 to 200, customers, if you will, a day and a total of about 1,500 tests to date over the past two weeks. And then I just want to thank everyone and reemphasize Executive Somers' supportive statements around social distancing. A very difficult time both socially and economically. I can't even begin to speak to the trouble that this is causing so many people. But COVID-

19 is also causing great trouble and it does appear that these efforts are starting to have an impact. Hospitalizations, although the system is stressed, it's not cracking and that is one of our primary objectives. So know that your efforts, although painful are having a meaningful impact. I wish I could give you a timeline on this. I can't. As the governor stated yesterday, we're still in this for at least another month. Again, speaking to the importance of all of us within government and across society pulling together to try to pull through this.

So thanks for listening. And with that, I'll pass it on to Mary Jane to share the amazing work that she and her team have been doing around this this situation.

Mary Jane Brell Vujovic:

Thank you so much Dr. Spitters and good morning everyone. I really want to thank the health district and all of our partners that really make this tremendous work possible. It is the effort of partners working together and collaborating. Early on when we knew that this crisis was starting to build, one of the first things we did collectively as partners was really identified that there were people out there who might not get information and might not be able to socially distance because they were experiencing homelessness. The health district was very prompt in getting us very good information to get out. And so we really mobilized the entire network of human services providers to get that information out to people living in encampments to shelters and to other facilities.

And we worked very hard to then identify what did we need to do to ensure that people who are in shelters and who are unsheltered can be able to do the social distancing we all knew was absolutely critical. So one of the first things we did was determined that we would continue a congregate sheltering site that was a seasonal site just operating in Everett, and that we would also create social distancing in that site. We also work very closely with foundations and other community partners to identify resources that could help us be able to move people quickly out of congregate sheltering sites so we could have social distancing in those sites and get people into hotel and motel rooms so that we would be able to spread individuals out.

That work has been underway for the last two months and to date, we've gotten over 220 individuals off the streets into either hotels, motels or some congregate sheltering sites with social distancing in order to make sure that people can be safe, as safe as possible. We know there are still people out there, we're still working to try to help people get off the streets into sheltered situations. We've also worked very closely with the health district as they've been standing up the quarantine and isolation site so that proper procedures can be followed to help as we identify people in need to get them to medical care and then get them to that site if needed.

But again, there are many people who we're working with who are not homeless, who also are moving into isolation quarantine and isolation. We work with thousands of people who are living in their homes, who are highly vulnerable and in some cases cannot stay and shelter in place. And so this partnership has been absolutely critical.

The resources and support we've gotten from the community based organizations and from philanthropic foundations has provided much needed resource, not just to the county, but to the agencies all over the county, who are then also providing information and emergency support to people in the community. As this progresses, we are also seeing increasingly and are now engaged in a number

of activities to ensure that the broader community has access to resources. We don't want to see people becoming homeless and then having to address more issues there. So we're working closely with state and federal and local partners to ensure that people who have a home can keep their home, that they can stay following social distancing practices, and that they can get the resources and support that they need while there. For example, we've identified people who are losing their employment opportunities are sometimes struggling to be able to apply for unemployment online, unemployment assistance online. Maybe there are linguistic issues or whatever. So we are working with community organizations that are helping walk people through that process so that they can keep a source of income going, be able to stay in their homes, pay rent and socially distance.

The work with people experiencing homelessness is continuing. We anticipate receiving more federal dollars, we are working with more hotels and motels to be able to get more people off the street, we have been working with community organizations that are very active in the street as they're seeing people who are particularly vulnerable to COVID out there being able to make sure those individuals are getting housed as quickly as possible. So a lot of work has gone on, there's a lot of work to do. And it was all a product of the partnerships that we see that we've been able to hopefully see a light here in this, in our experience here in Snohomish County.

Joint Information Center: Alright, thank you. This is Kari in the Joint Information Center. Sorry, got an echo there. Okay, I think we've solved the echo. Thank you all, we are taking questions by chat now. We have a few that have come in already that I've placed in the chat box, so if people can work on responding to those

Dave Somers:

Dr. Spitters, you're still muted.

Dr. Spitters:

Okay. Thank you. So of the personal protective gear shipment that arrived in the county last Friday, did any go to long term care facilities? Yes. If so, how much to how many facilities. I can't tell you. We can try to get that information for you. In general, we're following a tiered prioritization where acute care facilities and long term care facilities that have cases are at the top of the prioritization list. Beyond that I'm not that close to the implementation of the distribution. But we certainly can pursue those figures for you and get back to you.

I'll also cover the question about how many people are staying at the isolation and quarantine site. Again, Wednesday was day one. There were zero. Yesterday, there was one admission.

Dave Somers:

There's a question regarding the drive through testing site and who should go and how long it will be running.

Dr. Spitters:

Regarding the drive through testing site. So in terms of its longevity, and this is a federally funded, health district operated, with technical assistance and materials and supplies and support from the federal government. So the federal government is moving on from this site on a week from today. So

the future fate of that testing site depends on what, if anything, can be arranged to sustain it given that termination of active resource support. So to be announced on that front.

And who should go there. Well, if you have cough and a fever and you want to be tested, you can go to the Snohomish Health District website snohd.org and click on the COVID button and then on that page look for the icon that says drive up testing site and you click on that and it takes you to a survey that determines whether you qualify for a test, and if so, then you get an appointment.

Dave Somers: And doctor, there was a question about is the Health District hiring for temporary positions like nurses, etc.

Dr. Spitters: Yes, we're, we're in the process of, there are some, you know, technical positions, some clinical positions related to our surveillance and prevention work, particularly around the long term care facilities. I would say watch the health district job site, go to the health district website, watch the job site. And I think something should be appearing up there within a few days. And when it does, we'll make some type of notification so people know to remind them to look.

Mary Jane Brell Vujovic:

I think the next question is for me and that is has the county seen an increase in people applying for benefits like food stamps, veteran benefits, etc. Well, we've seen a tremendous increase in people applying for unemployment compensation. So that is, in fact Snohomish County has had the highest increase of anywhere in the state. So we're really working very closely with our partners in the worksource system and workforce Snohomish to help make sure that people are able to access those benefits and stabilize applications. We certainly are hearing much more about food insecurity that people are experienced or are afraid that they will be experiencing between now and May 4 so we're working very closely with other partners at the state to make sure that people can apply for various benefits that they need in order to get through the crisis.

Dr. Spitters:

I see a follow up question on the drive through testing side asking about positives. It's approximately I think 4%. The last count I heard was roughly 35 positives out of over 1,000 tests. But I think the denominator there is less than 1,000, we don't have all the results back but it's about 4% positive. So, two or three dozen positives is the number so far.

Mary Jane Brell Vujovic:

Now, I believe the next question is for me. The Community Foundation has raised more than a million dollars. How will that money be used? That money is already being used. The Community Foundation formed a partnership early on with United Way of Snohomish County with the Health District and with Snohomish County government to review requests that were coming in, needs that were being identified, review the needs that were being identified through other channels such as ongoing community conversations. And once a week, work on getting that money out into the field. The donors were advised that there would not be an application process per se. The intent was to keep this very streamlined, very lean and so resources, I believe, at this point about 700, \$750,000 from resources have been identified and made available to primarily community organizations out in the community. And that is primarily to provide flexible emergency assistance to individuals and families, so that

includes agencies serving a wide range of populations and agencies throughout the county. There will be another review of additional requests that are being made. We're seeing needs from municipalities and other community organizations and we'll be working together to look at how to make sure those last resources get out into the field. They have formed a critical bridge to funds that we know are coming as have the county and health district resources, resources that we know are coming as result of passage of the cares act.

Dr. Spitters:

I see a question about why are these temporary positions needed. I'm assuming that refers to the question about health district increasing staffing. These would be individuals primarily geared to support the surveillance and control efforts. Contacting and interviewing reported cases and even higher priorities, focusing on telephone and onsite follow up and technical assistance for long term care facilities that have cases of COVID-19.

Joint Information Center: Thank you everyone. It looks like we've gotten through the questions. So we'll go ahead and wrap up here, please stay tuned for future media availabilities. And thank you for joining us.