

Transcript: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, April 21, 2020, Press Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: Thanks for joining us today. So since January 21 when the first case of COVID in the U.S. was identified in Snohomish County, we've been spending really 100% of our time and energy focused on saving lives and keeping as many people healthy as possible. We appear to be having success. Our curve seems to be flattened and our rates of infection have not spiked. In fact, the governor told us the other day that Snohomish County seems to be headed down the backside of the curve and some other adjacent counties, King, Pierce, seem to be on a plateau. But time will tell. And we need to keep doing what we're doing. I just really want to thank the residents of Snohomish County in the region for doing the hard work and doing what is necessary to stay healthy and to save lives, frankly.

So over the last several weeks, we've been working on multiple fronts ensuring our health care safety system is working, functioning, essential workers have access to PPE, our families that are in need have food, and county government services continued to fill its responsibilities. So most of our employees are working online and doing so successfully. So that's a great success story. We were able to transition very quickly to remote work and we've kept our operations going many fronts. Our Emergency Management Department is working 24-7 to secure PPE resources for our partners throughout the county, there is still a shortage, and I know Dr. Spirits can go into great depth about this, but there's a shortage of protective equipment and also the supplies needed to increase testing. So, we will continue to work on that over the coming weeks, and probably months.

So just recently, we've began our work on recovery and recovery planning, particularly in the area of economic recovery. So, Chairman Nate Nehring, Councilman Nate Nehring and myself, established in cooperation with the county council Task Force for economic recovery and that task force held its first meeting yesterday. So we know a lot of people are hurting, a lot of businesses, a lot of families, a lot of individuals are really suffering the economic consequences of the COVID virus and we want to get out in front as far as we can to assist people in recovery as we come out of this. So the Task Force has 27 members, they had their first meeting yesterday, as I mentioned. Former mayor, Everett mayor, Ray Stephanson and Amy Drewel are co chairing that task force and the task force is really designed to have broad representation across sectors from agriculture, forestry, all the way up to aerospace. All the businesses and business sectors that we have in Snohomish County are represented on that task force. And it's also meant to align in structure and in sectors with state and federal efforts that we know will be coming so it's meant to fit into broader efforts, but this really focuses on Snohomish County. At the same time that task force is meeting, each county council member will be establish a Work Group from their county council districts to solicit further input from our business sectors localized within parts of the county. So anybody, any business owner or operator can really plug in with their ideas and let us know what they need for speedy recovery and we'll be working as a team again throughout the county and throughout the region, throughout the state to help businesses get back on.

Along those lines, it's been widely reported and it's true that Boeing and started up operations at the Everett plant. Again, we're very pleased with that. They put in very significant protection measures for their employees, PPE, everybody will be wearing face masks. Sanitation equipment, social distancing measures, and so we are very hopeful that that will be successful. Over the last month when they were shut down they were working overtime to really come up with a system to protect their employees and get things rolling again so over the coming weeks, we'll be watching that carefully and to see how successful it is and maybe be able to employ some of those measures in broader sectors and businesses.

So part of the task force's mission will be to look at what's working and sharing that information across many businesses.

So we are looking to the future, we are not out of this yet. As I mentioned many times, we've done a great job, our residents have done a great job flattening the curve, but we need to keep going on this and be assured that we've got a lot of great people working to figure out how to do this safely so we can save lives and protect our health. And this is going to take a while, but we're working to ease back as best we can and provide information. So we've got to not slacken up on our social distancing measures, I ask you all to be safe. Our lives don't stop. We need to get out and get food. We need to get out and get fresh air, but wearing some protection equipment, keeping your social distancing. That's all vitally important. Yet it's not time to loosen up. And you've probably all heard the analogy now it's spread far and wide. I first heard it from the governor last week that this is like, his wife Trudy likens it to, you jump out of an airplane with a parachute and you pull the cord and you slow down and say, hey, that's great we slowed down and take a parachute off. That is the situation we're in. We can't take that parachute off. We've not landed and we've got some ways until we can really get back to normal. So thank you everyone and be safe and be healthy. So with that, I'll turn it over to Dr. Spitters at Snohomish Health District.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Well, thank you so much Executive Somers, in particular for those comments encouraging folks to abide on through this and stick with the social distancing and couldn't have state it better. So thank you very much for that. And good morning everyone. I want to just step right into a few updates. As we announced last Friday, we do not have any drive through testing sites open to the public this week. Instead our focus has turned to our testing for purposes of transmission, prevention and control in long term care facilities. We tested two facilities last week and have four more scheduled for this week. Our team will be reviewing the data and results this week, and we should be able to share some useful information at next Tuesday's media availability. We are also continuing to evaluate supply and demand for testing on a weekly basis to determine if additional drive through testing sites would be useful and feasible in Snohomish County in the near future.

Speaking of testing, we've had a growing number of individuals contacting the Health District because their employer is requiring them to present two negative test results before they can return to work. And I just want to address that as a pretty big barrier to getting some of our essential workers back to work. While negative testing does exist as an option for documenting eligibility for release from isolation, it is not the preferred method or the current standard for COVID-19 in Snohomish County so or Washington State, especially given the limited testing supplies. We encourage businesses to follow the guidance that we give clinicians and patients, that is a COVID-19 patient is eligible for release from isolation once they have been without fever for 72 hours and their cough has been improving for 72 hours and it has been at least seven days since the onset of illness. And so due to the limitations of testing supplies the logistics that that imposes on the worker, we really encourage you to go with that guideline for return to work and, you know, if someone's still coughing, you could consider having them stay away from clients and remain masked, but we really encourage you to go with that time based rather than test based release from isolation and permission to return to work. And just a reminder for all of us. Again, if you're sick, regardless of whether you're positive, negative, or haven't been tested for COVID-19, stay home and follow these timelines for self isolation at home.

Thus far, we have about 1,500 individuals in Snohomish County who are classified as recovered. I'll talk about what that means in just a moment. But again, many of these individuals are essential workers who need to get back to work. Once they're healthy, both for their own well being and for the organization they serve for the clients of that organization. So, requiring those two negative tests really does put a significant barrier in there that's really not necessary.

The term recovered. You may see that now on our daily data updates. Recovered is a term that is a surveillance term. It's not a clinical term. I mean, certainly the patient is recovered is a term we use in medicine, all the time. This, in this context, what you'll see in our reports the term recovered is a surveillance term. It's kind of an administrative term for managing our work with the cases as a group and someone's considered recovered by state and local definition when they're, it's 28 days past their onset, they're still alive and they're not in the hospital. And so that helps us kind of put those folks who are long past, at least, you know, two to three weeks past having been contagious. They're not an imminent concern and they're, you know now, they move from that pile of people of disease control concern to those who are considered safe and can be released and go about their activities if they feel well enough.

My final point this morning is to talk about case count updates. As you know, our staff have been working tirelessly over the past three months to make more information available on virtually a daily basis to help the community track what's going on. Friday's addition to the data was a new chart that tracks positive and negative test results as well as a sub analysis of the first 1100 cases reported and looking at the incidence of disease based on race and ethnicity. We discussed that a bit on Friday, I'm happy to take any questions later if you have about that again.

That chart won't be updated daily because that takes a special analysis that's not automated and we don't have enough time to do that every day. But we'll do it periodically and update it every, every few weeks. I did want to say that starting this weekend, we will not be updating case counts daily. We will do it Monday through Friday daily, but not Saturday and Sunday. We really have to prioritize our staff's limited time, especially on weekends to higher order tasks addressing disease control and at this point in the epidemic the marginal information by updating figures on those Saturdays and Sundays, it really doesn't change the information available to us or to you. So we're going to de-emphasize those weekend daily case updates, but you'll continue to see them Monday through Friday.

As we've heard shared from the governor in the state in order to be able to look at, at downgrading some of our mitigation strategies, public health needs to have adequate case investigation and contact tracing capacity. We're actively involved with the state health department at this point in developing a plan for the technical components of that, what the staffing would look like, and ultimately, how that will all get paid for. And one of the barriers to us having, you know, getting fully engaged in that is clearing up the backlog of uninvestigated cases. And our staff have just done a tremendous job getting that down from about 700 cases three weeks ago, we're down to just under 400 now. So almost cut it in half, we hope to get that down to zero soon, and that will give us more flexibility to respond quickly in time and to new cases being reported in the future. And that's a key part of our control and suppression efforts going forward.

Well, I think that kind of covers it. Oh, so I just want you to share that information with your audiences. So they're not surprised when they don't see weekend updates on the case counts. It doesn't mean something's going wrong or that anything's being concealed. We're just de-emphasizing that. So thank

you in advance for helping to get that message out to your audiences and colleagues. And with that, I'd like to turn it over to Tim Teigen.

Tom Teigen: Tom Teigen, I do have a brother named Tim, though, and he'll appreciate that. No problem. Tom Teigen, Snohomish County Parks, Recreation, Tourism Department director. Thank you, Executive Somers and Dr. Spitters.

I wanted to give an update on where we are with Snohomish County Parks. Beginning in mid March, we started the process of closing down parks amenity by amenity and working our way through to a soft closure. We started with closing playgrounds on March 18, going to closing restrooms, parking areas, trail heads beginning on March 22 and we've been keeping that consistent throughout.

We also came up with some messaging that was, you know, fairly simple, which was, if you take your car, the park's too far. Early on in March, mid March, late March, we were seeing a lot of folks still try to travel out from urban areas to trail heads, whether they were county trailhead or DNR or state parks. And I'm proud to say that in the last 10 days you've all done very well, we're seeing way less crowds. It's very important to try to recreate. The governor, county executive, all of us want you to be able to recreate and get outside and spend time outside, but it's really important to try to do that near home, do that safely. Observe social distancing, wear a mask if you choose to. And definitely, you know, take care of yourself. And we know that parks and outdoor spaces are part of our community. They're, they're part of the environment, the communities we live in. We all want to be there, but we need to do it responsibly. So responsible recreation is really what we've been pushing now for over a month and we are seeing folks do a better job with it.

Our current status, again, is that the park gates and restrooms, playgrounds, campgrounds, those areas will all be closed until at least May 4, potentially longer depending on where we go as a state and region. Events, gatherings, shelter reservations, the large scale, and all that is cancelled at least through May 20 and most likely much longer as we work through this process.

And if your park has pedestrian access and you live near then we do encourage you again to use that park and trail. But don't take your vehicle there and we're encouraging you to stay home and enjoy walking and biking and just recreating outdoors again with social distancing

City parks, state parks, the counties may have different guidelines. We are all working together. There's a regional forum. We speak Mondays and Thursdays. That's for the state, several counties, over 90 cities and we're all working together to try to be as consistent as we can. And all of us are saying please recreate responsibly with social distancing and take care of yourselves.

We want to remind people about the park closures that if you are trying to take a car and you're parking at trail heads or parking on roads, you may be creating a greater safety risk for yourself and others. And so please do not park illegally on roads or near gates or near parks and that can cause a problem. Our first responders have a lot to deal with as it is now, let alone with something at a park entry gate.

Again, we do want you to get outside. Enjoy your park system. Snohomish County we have 110 Park sites, 12,000 acre system, 47 miles of shoreline that we manage, and we love that and we're very happy to see so many people who want to be out there, but please do it responsibly and do it respectfully. And we will have parks open as soon as we possibly can. But again, this may take several months to roll out slowly as we go through the process.

Dave Somers: Thank you, Tom. So we'll take some questions now. Has the Health District seen any trends increases or decreases in people who have died of COVID 19 at home versus at a hospital or assisted living facility? Doctor?

Dr. Chris Spitters: You know, we've had, I have to, you know, preface this. I don't think we've done an analysis of that because that's that feature of where the person dies is not codified, so that takes some deep looking into the notes and then codifying what's in the notes and then analyzing it. So that's probably not something we're doing in real time. Anecdotally, the majority of people that are succumbing to, the vast majority of deaths occurring due to COVID-19 are occurring at acute and long term care facilities. There are occasional cases found at home, I think, last Friday, you know anyone that dies at home, basically, unless it's a hospice death that ends up falling, falling under the medical examiner's jurisdiction. And I think of as of last Friday, Dr. Lacy said he had had 10 suspected cases fall under his jurisdiction, since it started with, I think, five or six of them testing positive and four results still pending. And again, keep in mind, we've got about 100 deaths. So that gives you an idea of the proportion that are occurring out of hospital.

Dave Somers: Thank you. So there's a question for me. The timeline for reopening states economies et. has been generating controversy. And what does reopening mean to you, what do you need to see before you support reopening Snohomish County? And I'll let Dr. Spitters has respond to this also but I think that reopening is going to look like a slow reopening of different sectors. We've seen a little bit with Boeing opening up but the criteria that have been laid out at the state level and even the federal level are quite clear that we need significantly more testing capability to identify and manage outbreaks. We need contact tracing ability on a broader scale, which is the next question, and also that we can address in more depth and detail. We need more personal protective equipment for people and workers to be available. And that's a ways off. We need more testing capacity and we do have limited supplies. Although laboratory capacity in the region exceeds our testing that we've been doing the materials you need for testing, swabs, the transport media etc. etc. are still in short supply. So there's a whole range of conditions that need to be in place. So I think it's going to look like a slow rollout. I think we'll be starting up. We'll see how Boeing does, how that works, if it works maybe apply those to some other sectors and really cautiously proceed forward. The virus is going to be around for quite some time. We can't open up. I do not see crowded, frankly, restaurants, bars, places where people are in close proximity of any sort in our near future. I do see some potential to loosen up businesses under strict conditions of personal distancing and protective equipment. So it's going to be a slow start up but we know people want to get going and need to get going. So we're going to be working on that. Doctor, do you want to add anything to that?

Dr. Chris Spitters: Well, Executive Somers, I think you just gave a great inventory of the criteria for proceeding down that pathway. And I have a similar sense the thinking that you know it's going to have, there's going to be a layered approach with more essential and vital services and operations returning before the less vital with appropriate social distancing and, you know, education of businesses, some self education. I think we're really relying on businesses to go to the health district or the Washington State Department of Health website, go to your businesses' or industries' Association websites too. I imagine they'll often have COVID information and look at the kinds of information that you need to have and kinds of things that need the business needs to have in place and the kind of education and equipment and situation we need in various businesses, that's something that all businesses can start planning on doing now as we anticipate going forward.

I wonder if this is a good moment to take up the contact investigation question. Someone asked, when it comes to contact tracing, is there any indication whether this would take new hires or would current staffing be redirected? If training is needed, how quickly can staff be trained for this type of work? You know, this question speaks directly to the work that's being done with the state health department right now. Certainly the current Health District staffing for contact investigations is not enough to do the intense and thorough scope of work that's envisioned as part of the, sort of this recovery mode of greater intensity of suppression of new cases, suppression of transmission among new cases to a greater degree than we're doing now with current staffing, so it would require additional staffing, training, management, supervision and funding of additional staff and how that's actually going to play out depends on how the plan evolves with the state health department and, so again, as I mentioned earlier, there's the technical components of how we'll actually be doing it. And then there's, you know, who will provide the staffing, is it state health department, Snohomish Health District, a mix. And then, you know, figuring out how we're going to fund and supervise those staff and train them as you mentioned, so that's all on the list, but it's not, it's not a small technical or human resources endeavor. And my guess is you know we're looking at maybe a week or two planning and then another several weeks, I imagine, of trying to get to a point where we could actually launch.

Dave Somers: There's a question if we have a sense of whether there's any problems with too many people at federal, on federal lands, national parks, National Forests, trail heads, etc.

Tom Teigen: You know, we actually are in communication pretty consistently with the Forest Service, national parks folks, as well as the state parks and our state fish and wildlife and our regional partners. Yeah, we've had problems, a number of problems at trail heads. It's gotten way better in the last seven to 10 days, as I mentioned earlier. But early on we had about two weeks where folks, the trailhead were closed, folks were disregarding that. And so you would end up with a lot of folks coming out of urban settings, driving 45 minutes to an hour and a half to get somewhere and then the trailhead was closed. This was everyone, Washington Trails Association, Evergreen mountain bike, everybody's been great and putting that information out to our enthusiast, but it was disregarded. And so we did have some problems with cars and blocking traffic and blocking gates and blocking neighbors in. We have a number of trail heads ourselves just in Snohomish County Parks, like a Heybrook Ridge and Lime Kiln, any of those sites that we did see people parking, you know, dangerously along rural roads and affecting them. So again, it's been very positive in the last seven to 10 days that people have really taken it to heart, see many more people recreating at home and enjoying social distancing, enjoying the outdoors. And we got over 5 million visitors to our parks every year just the county park system, let alone the state parks with their 40 million, and Federal lands. And so we know we love to recreate, we love to spend time outdoors. It's healthy. But now's the time to be staying close to home and recreating responsibly.

Dave Somers: I would just say just to put a bow on that is recreation is one of our largest economic drivers in the in the County. Tourism, recreation, so that'll be very much a part of our planning for recovery and how we can do that safely, where and how. But we just thank people for their cooperation at this time. Thank you.

Joint Information Center: Thank you everyone for joining us and please stay tuned for future media availabilities

