

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, May 1, 2020, Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: Good morning, and thank you all for joining us today. You know, we've passed a milestone here in Snohomish County, we're past the hundred day mark. It's an important mark. It seems like three years ago, frankly, I think for most of us, a long time ago. It's been over 100 days. And when we were headed into this we were really concerned about keeping people safe and whether people would be able to stay in place, stay at home, keep themselves and their families and their friends safe and we were facing really things that we saw on television from Wuhan, terrible sickness and death in an overwhelming of the medical system that didn't happen here thanks to our residents that have just done a fantastic job. Thank you so much. You saved lives. But as we go into this next phase we're really still a long way out from being through this. Until there is a vaccine and effective treatment we're going to have to take extra precautions for the coming foreseeable future. So we particularly want to ask our vulnerable population, if you're 60 or over, have an underlying health condition, please take extra precautions, and for the rest of us also we'll make sure that we're protecting both ourselves, our families, but those that are most vulnerable.

But very happy today to say with that we will be opening up our park system again starting May 5. Our parks will be available for hiking, boating, just walking and being outside enjoying our pretty amazing park system we have here in Snohomish County. Parking lots will be open and available, but there will be limited facilities there. So very happy that those are opening up but we're going to ask you to make sure that you follow some precautions. So we've got some tips for you. First of all, really know before you go, plan ahead. Do some research on the park, what's there, what you want to take advantage of. But remember that there are going to be limited facilities so just plan your trip. Stick with your squad. Stay with the people you came with, practice social distancing but really give extra space to others that are at the park enjoying it also. Third is really be prepared, play prepared, bring water, food, other things. It's really limited services available, again. But you want to be self-sufficient and you know, many, many restaurants are closed, but some are doing take out to just really be prepared as if you were going on a hike somewhere. The fourth thing we ask you is if there's no space find another place. If the park is crowded, parking lot's crowded, please find another spot. We're trying to avoid, minimize crowds. We saw what happened in California this past week with crowded beaches and now they're having to close beaches down again. We don't want that to happen here in our park system. So if there's no space, if it's crowded go to another place. The fifth thing is be considerate of other visitors, maintain that six foot distance at all times. And the final thing we're asking is to please stay local. Enjoy our park system here in Snohomish County. We're asking people not to head over to other communities and other communities are doing the same thing. So to stay local, enjoy our county and enjoy our park system. So we really need your cooperation, you've been fantastic to date on everything. So just practice safe practices.

Next thing I want to talk to about is a little bit about food supplies and the great work that's been done with our food network here in the county. And we all have family and friends that are out of work, we know people are hurting, there's many, many others that are facing just income shortages and food shortages or ability to get food. So our Emergency Coordination Center in Snohomish County has been working with private sector partners to support daycares, school lunch programs, food banks, and grocery stores to ensure that food continues to flow into the county. Particularly want to call out the staff at Sysco have been really flexible and great partners, they've been providing food supplies, sanitation products, and even a refrigerated

truck to support local food banks. And for our other community members we need your help. Check on your neighbor, volunteer at your local food bank. Don't buy more than you need. There's plenty of food in the system for everybody, and support local farmers and producers as much as you can. If you find somebody in the family or a neighbor, friend that doesn't have adequate food, help them out. Visit your local food bank. I know it's difficult for many people to do that. They don't want to, or haven't done it before, but if somebody's really having difficulty with not having enough food, please, help them out and the food banks are there to assist in times like this. So please use that service.

So thank you again and looking forward to getting our parks open. And with that, I'll hand it over to Dr. Spitters with the Snohomish Health District.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Thank you, Executive Somers and good morning everyone. I'd like to start off today talking about long term care facility testing as you've, we've mentioned several times over the past couple of weeks since demobilizing our drive through testing site that was conducted with FEMA. We're now focusing our testing capacity at the health district on long term care facility, the long term care facilities to facilitate control and prevention of spread in those settings. So in the past couple of weeks, excuse me just a minute while I pull this up, in the past couple of weeks we've conducted testing at eight facilities throughout the county totaling 405 tests among residents, 404 tests among staff. Among the tested residents, 65 or 16% were positive and among the staff tested, 35 or 9% were infected. So we're using that largely as a case finding tool in in specific settings. We're not testing all residents and all staff in every long term care facility, but when we encounter one that appears to have a cluster or an outbreak going, we want to get everyone tested so that we can identify those who are infected, keep them together and have them care for one section of the building. And then the uninfected, keep an eye on them but keep them separate from the infected. And then as well with the staff. We want to make sure that if they're infected that they're not providing care until they're out of their infectious period and then if there were ever a shortage of staff, then they would be, their work duties would be limited to the people who are already infected. So that's a tool we've been using. And I know you were interested in hearing some follow up on those results. So there they are.

Moving on to other aspects of testing. We did start back up again this past, the last week, two days a week testing through a site in Lynnwood. On, we tested 42 folks on Wednesday, 41 had rapid test negative, one was a technical problem so. But 41 out of 41 tested negative. And then all 42 we sent a duplicate specimen to the state for the laboratory based PCR testing because as we start up the use of this point of care test we want to assure its validity or at least know its limitations. So we're doing dual testing until we get a little track record established there. For today, we've got about 50 people scheduled at the Lynnwood site. Later today we'll be releasing details for next week's testing again likely Wednesday and Friday. And so look for information about that as well as keep an eye on our website on the COVID page, there's usually a link to sign up for testing once testing for a particular day has been opened.

I want to just mention what you may have heard in the news in the past day or two that the antiviral drug Remdesivir, which has been used in in COVID patients as part of clinical trials to assess its safety and efficacy in treatment of COVID-19. It recently received an emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration. So that's not final approval but in the interim during the COVID crisis clinicians are now free to use that outside of the setting of a clinical trial. It's not, I'm not a COVID-19 clinician and so for, I think for, you know, nuanced

details and front row seat information about using that I encourage you to speak with clinicians. But the general idea, I think, is that it shortens the duration of illness, on average, from about 14 days to 11. And that was a statistically significant difference, not a dramatic difference but statistically significant. And then the deaths in the group that got Remdesivir were slightly lower but not statistically significantly lower so that difference seen could just be due to random chance. So as you can see, this is not a magic cure for this, but it might mitigate disease in some folks and it's a step in the right direction. And as Dr. Fauci said it's proof of concept that this drug or a relative of it can ultimately have a role in treatment of COVID-19.

A couple other clinical points. We continue to get feedback from our emergency medicine care providers that they're continuing to see people showing up late for urgent or emergent conditions that should not have been delayed. And it raises concern that our message about, you know, staying away from acute care facilities to leave room for COVID patients might be getting taken to heart too much. So we just want to reiterate, if someone's got a cough or a fever and wants to seek care, we encourage them to do that. We just want them to call ahead of time so that they can be placed appropriately for the protection of themselves and others, and for other folks who want to seek care, again call in and try to get something set up. But if you've got severe pain, difficulty breathing, chest pain, something else that's wrong and you feel like this needs to get looked at, don't shy away from going. One, delays in care can, can you know, shift the possible outcomes more toward the negative end the longer you wait. The longer you wait, the harder it is to get whatever the problem is fixed and get you back to 100% of what you were before the problem came up, and sometimes delays can lead to permanent consequences or even death. And then the other thing is the hospitals are safe, the emergency rooms, urgent cares, they've designed flow of patients so that people in there for fever and cough are going down a different lane than those who aren't. And so, physical and functional separation is part of the plan to keep everyone safe. And so just want to encourage folks do not delay care while this is going on. Okay.

Moving on to some more public health prevention messages to complement what executive Somers covered. We just want to encourage the wearing of cloth face coverings when in public. This is not a requirement, but it is a strong recommendation. The purpose is to prevent, is to protect others, remembering that we can be contagious for COVID-19 up to two days prior to detecting symptoms like fever, cough, sore throat, it looks like a day or two prior to that feeling you can still be spreading so, you know, if you have a cough or sneeze, you can, you can infect others. And so we really want, you know, when you go grocery shopping, other indoor places for essential trips, we really want you to wear a cloth face covering. Please don't use medical grade mask equipment. We really need that reserved for the health care providers, first responders, and others involved in the COVID response. So again, the purpose is to protect others and so if you're going to be indoors or in spaces where you can't reliably maintain at least a six foot buffer from others, please wear a cloth face covering. As farmers markets and recreation opportunities start to open up, as Executive Somers mentioned, please continue to follow social distancing. Another thing to keep in mind is as you go out to the parks, I think executive Somers alluded to this, is it's availability of lavatory facilities, of toilets, might vary from site to site. So if you're not absolutely sure, plan your trip accordingly. And, you know, use the restroom before you leave home or at your last stop before arriving to the facility. And if you don't know, be prepared to, you know, keep things short in case you need to go to the bathroom. Keep six feet between you and other folks, wear those cloth face coverings, bring water bottles with you as some facilities' fountains may still be turned off. Carry hand sanitizer with you and wash hands when you return

you know when you get back in the car, especially, and then wash your hands with soap and water when you get back home. When shopping, please wait your turn and touch only those products that you want to buy.

And just the last item circling back around to another angle on the data that I was sharing earlier. This is not cause for alarm, but sort of just observation and caution, is over the past couple of weeks after case counts had been steadily coming down we've seen things level off at around on average about 30 cases that are being reported down from our peak of about 100 a day a month ago. That flattening, it may just be that's the new baseline, that's just what we're able to achieve with the current public health intervention, social distancing, testing, isolation, quarantine. Certainly my hope and my colleagues' hope was that we could get to a little bit lower baseline as a prelude to further opening of human activity, but I think it just merits considering that if any of, any of the sort of the flattening over the past couple weeks reflects, you know, just the urge the we've all been cooped up for more than a month, weather's getting better. A couple weeks ago, we had a big holiday that might have been a contributor, maybe bringing people out a little bit more than we hoped and leading to some transmission that we're now detecting. So I don't want to start sound alarm bells, but I'm, certainly we're watching the data closely to see if there's any corresponding increase in hospitalizations or further increase in cases but in the meantime I just really urge you, if you're not engaged in one of the approved activities that has been opened up, please try to stay at home, stay near home, only engage in essential trips and when you're out doing those permitted activities, please, please, please, maintain social distancing. So thanks for your time and attention. And now I'd like to turn it over to Linda Neunzig.

Linda Neunzig: Early on in the emergency response, Snohomish County had the foresight to set up a food systems team within the emergency coordination center. This team has worked closely with various different entities, including emergency daycares. These emergency daycares were set up for childcare for emergency responders and essential workers. We help to assist them in purchasing food to keep the kids fed, everything from grab and go items to fresh products. We also assisted in finding supplies such as gloves, disinfecting wipes, many things that will allow them to quickly and efficiently do what needed to be done for these kids. We've also worked with the school system, which now are feeding many more kids than what they were doing. They also had to switch up what they were feeding. Kids could no longer come in and sit down and have cooked meals. They needed grab and go meals and these meals oftentimes also included breakfast that they can take home. Working with companies such as Sysco and other individual private companies, we were able to assist them in getting the increased amount of product and the right type of product to be able to keep these kids fed and fed into the future. Our food banks have been another one that we've worked extensively with. Partnering with the Volunteers of America and Food Lifeline to support over a 40% increase in users at our food bank. We'd like to announce that today five full semi trucks with emergency boxes of food will be delivered from Food Lifeline. These will contain 5,600 emergency boxes in total. These will be delivered to the Volunteers of America and distributed to local food banks, this will go on for 12 weeks and each week. This will ramp up the number of semis and the number of boxes that will be delivered to Volunteers of America. Within a 12 week period that number will have gone up to 21,738 boxes in the final week to be distributed to families. We want to thank everyone who continues to support the efforts of the local food banks during this time of need. Volunteering and donating is a great way to help your local community. There's a

consistent need for volunteers, a consistent need for food products and monetary donations to this fascinating, fantastic group of volunteers and food banks that are going on right now.

Our local agricultural production is very, very strong in Snohomish County. We are still at the very beginning of our planting season and growing season here in Snohomish County for our farmers and all of Western Washington. We work very closely with our farmers to be able to connect them to the need within Snohomish County. We also want to assure you that our farmers, our dairy farmers are not dumping any milk. All excess milk has been and continues to go to our local food banks. Whenever you go into a food bank you see dairy products. Those are coming directly from our local farmers here in Western Washington. The same goes with our egg production. There are many eggs that you will see in there, commodity type eggs, and those are coming from right here in Snohomish County. Because our farmers have a diverse sales network, as restaurant sales decreased and institutional sales decreased they were able and ready to move that product right into the retail sales channels. So we have no losses of agricultural food products in Western Washington. As individuals you have many opportunities to support our local farmers. As Dr. Spitters said our local farmers markets, they're getting ready to open up, many open today and tomorrow. You have opportunities to go out and support those farmers, they're practicing social distancing, their market booths are farther apart. And some of those are even drive through farmers markets where as you drive through you can order directly from that farmer and they will hand you the product that you would like to have. So you can still support those farmers markets. Many people are also choosing to purchase community supported agriculture where you can buy a share in that farmer's production for the season. There has been a 50% increase in local sales of community supported agriculture. You can also go directly to many of the farmers and buy right from their farm stands on site. In order to find these farms you can go to the Washington State Tilth Alliance, their website is www.farm-guide.org. In there you can find all of the farmers that are selling direct to consumers and you can find CSA and all of the farmers markets with contact and location information.

Your food supply in Snohomish County and Western Washington is a secure and safe food supply. Buy local, look in the grocery stores, you can find local product. And go out and meet one of your local farmers. I'll turn it back over to you, Executive Somers.

Dave Somers: Thank you and if you have any questions please type them in the chat now and we'll answer them as best we can.

Chris Spitters: Maybe I'll take a shot at the first one. Question from Hanna Scott. Why is there no order requiring facemasks? This a two part question. I'll answer that one first. Well, first you know, generally everything we've been doing, although there have been some thou shalt elements to the public health regime, if you will, around this mostly we're really, really have relied, and I think by and large with great success, on the voluntary support and participation of the community. And so this is another example of that. Also, you know, enforceability of making that a requirement. You know, I'm not ruling out the possibility that at some point in the future, either at the state level or locally, that could become a consideration, but I think, you know, we have to weigh the benefits of, the additional benefits from making it mandatory versus the cost, the intrusion and again, the difficulty of enforcing such a thing. So again, I just want to continue to count on the generally cooperative spirit of the residents Snohomish County, encourage you all to wear cloth face coverings when appropriate. Part two: Can you provide any detail about the circumstances of the new daily cases you're seeing such as where they're happening, how it's transmitting, long term care, households. Overall, I'd say over the past couple of weeks the,

you know, we're seeing it throughout the county in all the typical risk groups, long term care, health care workers, healthcare workers in long term care as well as those an acute and outpatient care. And then, you know, there is that group that overall has been about 40% of all cases that don't have an identifiable risk factor, meaning they just caught it in the community somewhere. Of late, it's more tilted toward long term care and healthcare workers and clusters, familial clusters occurring in the community not connected with any facility, but we're, you know, we're able to identify known contacts or contacts who are known cases of, you know, case number two and case number three are all from a family or social network that we're aware of. So on the one hand that's reassuring that the transmission is not occurring in unexpected places. And so that's, you know, somewhat mitigating information, but still I have overall concern about not being able to sustain the decline.

Dave Somers: So let me address the testing kits and equipment, just briefly, our department emergency management does coordinate with the state and we combine orders from all the partners within the county and feed those up to the state. I don't have specifics on what we will be receiving and I believe the materials that the state is expecting are expected to arrive next week or later so that they are not here yet, but we do coordinate that and funnel requests up to the state.

There was another question about whether the county coordinated with individual cities on reopening parks. I have a call with the mayors of all our cities, three times a week, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. We did talk to them, let them know we're going to be doing this. I think each city will make its own decision regarding its individual parks, but yes, we've coordinated with the cities. But again, each city and each mayor and city council will make their own decisions on their parks. And I believe most will be open. Again, we will not have restroom facilities open and playgrounds will remain closed or taped off, the sort of community surfaces that we want people to avoid but my understanding is that most parks will be open in the county.

There is a question if new daily cases are coming from expected places, what can you do to reduce cases. And I'm sorry my chat seems to be lagging and if we've already addressed that question. But doctor, is that something you want to address?

Chris Spitters: Sure. Certainly. Well, you know, to an extent we can, you know, we continue to do what we're doing, which is communicate with cases. And excuse me I failed to read the question for those of you who can't see it. If new daily cases are coming from expected places, what can you do to reduce those cases? Again, we'll continue to do more, you know, of what we're doing, which is communicate with the cases when we learn about them, make sure they're isolated, identifying their contacts, getting information out to their contacts to quarantine, and then ideally getting their contacts who develop symptoms tested and then if they're positive do additional contact tracing off of their case. And that's, you know, the basic principle and we're trying to amplify that system of hiring and training. New staff and reassigning people and getting Medical Reserve Corps volunteers as well involved to try to amplify our human resources capacity there. But, you know, that's what, that and the social distancing are really the two tools in the, that we've got right now. And so we'll continue to do our part and try to amplify it as time comes. Some of it is just a challenge in dealing with numbers in that if you roughly estimate that maybe there's five to 10 real cases out there for every case that's reported, that's sort of a general rule of thumb that's not an accurate, you know, precision estimate, but there's probably we have known about 200 to 300 people in isolation, at one time, that probably reflects that there's maybe 1,000 to 2,000 people out in the community, some of whom know they're ill and

are staying home, some of whom are asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic and wandering around. So that's a lot of people wandering around still that have COVID and are capable of transmitting it. And that's why, again, we're, although things are looking good, it's a little bit early to really open the gates on all human activity. And meanwhile we're trying to augment our efforts to reach those folks, both in terms of identifying them with testing and then getting their contacts quarantined.

Dave Somers: There's a last question and it's: the governor is expected to extend his order through the end of May. Is there a concern that quarantine fatigue, coupled with expanded outdoor activities could lead to non-compliance and a new urge or a new surge of the virus. The short answer is yes, there is a concern. I think we're all experiencing people's frustration. I think folks have been great, polls show about two thirds of the folks really support everything we're doing and the stay at home order. So that's fantastic. But yes there's a danger that if we open things up too much and people get careless that we could see another surge in the virus and would really cause us to have to impose or ask for more restrictions down the road. So that's the danger. It's a fine balance because people do need to get out. They need to have lives. They need to be able to exercise and enjoy our county and fresh air and the scenery and some little bit of distance socializing, but it's a great concern. And we're just trying to really find the best path to let people and give them opportunities to get outside but also asking them to socially distance. And so we hope we don't see a resurgence. Doctor, you might want to speak to that further.

Chris Spitters: I think I can't improve on that. I think you're really, you really covered it, that it is a concern, and we need, we need everyone's help to, you know, some return to activity, but there's, you know, if we don't do it wisely on an individual and a mass level we're going to see a resurgence of cases. And so we really need everyone's help to socially distance, distance themselves while engaging in these activities and overall just try to maintain the difficult and painful discipline that you've been showing over the past couple of months.