

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, May 5, 2020, Briefing

Dave Somers: Good morning. So as I mentioned last week, our park system has been opened up today for day use only and no camping. There'll be limited facilities, although we are making provisions for most facilities with porta potties, sani-cans, and hand washing stations as best we can. We're just asking everybody to maintain social distancing, be safe, be smart. We really want this to go well. It's vitally important that people just really follow basic safety regulations and standards that we're all familiar with now. The weather's supposed to improve throughout the week and so we're expecting crowds out. But again, asking people if there's crowded parking lots, it looks like there's large crowds gathering, please go somewhere else. And check ahead to see exactly what's going to be open and available.

One other issue I wanted to talk about that we really haven't discussed too much is our solid waste system. These are frontline workers for the county. We take our system for granted with collecting and getting rid of our waste and those folks work in difficult conditions, often confined offices, a lot of contact with the public, and at the start of the COVID crisis we had to really limit the availability and hours at many of our transfer stations and drop boxes. Out in my part of the county we have a dropbox in Sultan. It was closed for several weeks. We run a lean tight ship. We don't have a lot of extra employees so when somebody could not come to work it was really impacting our ability to staff the facilities. But again, we had to come up with methods and ways to make it a safe environment. So over the weekend, we were able to expand access to most of our solid waste facilities. Transfer stations are going to be open from 7 a.m. to 4:30 daily for hand unloads, self-haul customers and mechanical unload customers. And the Sultan and Dubuque drop boxes will be open 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on various days of the week and you can get online on our website and see exactly when those openings are, but Sultan dropbox will be open Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Dubuque dropbox will be open, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. We're putting a limit of five cubic yards per customer and the Granite Falls dropbox is going to remain close until further notice so you will have to use one of the others. There is no recycling or household hazardous waste disposal at any of the facilities and we're only accepting credit and debit cards, no checks or cash. And yard debris will only be accepted at transfer stations as garbage and all loads will be weighed for payment at the transfer stations. So we're really pleased our solid waste program is back up and running, we know it was a hardship on many folks but we really had to make sure that we were operating in a safe environment and we got our workers back on the job. So I just want to thank our solid waste team on behalf of our 800,000 plus residents of Snohomish County for the job they do every day and really glad that things are back up and running and hope this goes smoothly also. So with that, I'll turn it over to Dr Spitters in the Snohomish Health District.

Chris Spitters: Thank you, Executive Somers. Good morning, everyone. I want to cover a couple of topics today. First is change in the duration of the isolation period for cases of COVID-19. This is kind of a technical matter in with respect to the health department's oversight of cases of COVID-19 but it does affect all of us, so good for everyone to know. The criteria in general that we use for letting people out of isolation is they have had no fever for at least 72 hours and their cough and other symptoms are improving and it's been at least seven days since they first became ill. So that's what we've been using for a couple of months now and in the past several days the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the state health department and we, in suit, have just modified that to extend that minimum duration from seven days to 10 days. The rationale for that is that a few people do still shed virus beyond seven

days. It's a diminishing number. And that's why initially we chose seven days. But now the federal officials feel like just to be a little bit more on the side of caution, stretch things out from seven to 10 days. There's even still a few people, a small percentage, who, after 10 days, may shed virus. So there's no perfect duration, we, you know, some people shed virus for several weeks, at least. Although the correlation with shedding viable virus, that is virus that can infect or virus that can be cultured in the laboratory, it's not clear that that's extended out that long. In fact, it looks like it's difficult to isolate the virus from people's secretions after a week. So the punch line is the minimum duration of isolation for cases is moved from seven days to 10 days.

I want to address another item. There was some rumor I think in social media and possibly in the broadcast and press media about CDC changing the death data and numbers and revising them downwards and that's really a procedural phenomenon. And if you just look at what's on the website it might look to you as though they reduced the number of deaths due to COVID-19 recorded in the country from approximately 60,000 down to 30,000. But what's really occurred is those 60,000 deaths still have occurred but they revised their counting process and so they have to go through a process of getting all the final data in on those cases from their case investigation before officially counting them in Atlanta at the Centers for Disease Control. We're still counting them in real time here. Snohomish County has 111 deaths due to COVID-19, that's not revised downward. And even the national figures, that's not really a revision. It's just a change in the sequence of the investigation and reporting so COVID-19 is regrettably no less fatal than it was before those stories came out.

Last I just want to talk for a minute with some reminders about the governor's orders. While we are in phase one here of this, the governor's reopening Washington plan, industries listed in the plan may only resume once safe operating procedures and guidance have been developed for those industries. As of today, May 5, only the outdoor recreation and construction are allowed in addition to previously permitted essential infrastructure work. The other industries, commercial activities listed in the governor's recent statement, like drive-in spiritual service, landscaping, curbside retail pickup, auto retailers, and car washes, guidance for those businesses are to be announced in the coming days. And it's once those businesses have received that guidance and implemented it, then they have a green light to resume business within the limits of that guidance that comes out. So, while most people in Snohomish County have been taking steps to keep themselves and other safe, we've heard that some people are purposefully disregarding recommendations and health orders. You know, again, our goal here is to limit suffering, morbidity, illness, and most importantly hospitalization and death. And so although people's perceptions about what is an acceptable risk of dying can vary from individual to individual, a common interest we all have is in making sure that the hospital system is able to care for all of the patients COVID-19 and otherwise who need acute care. And so a major objective of our social distancing and control efforts is to keep the hospital system with enough capacity to function to care for everyone and to accommodate any surge in demand for care that might arise from our opening up of activities. So again, we urge everyone's compliance with the social distancing guidance and if you do have concerns about a particular business, there's an online option to report businesses that are violating orders. You can find that link on our COVID web page or the state's website at coronavirus.wa.gov. And at that point, the state agency with duty of oversight for that business will follow up with that business and possible remedies can be, can involve the license for the business itself or civil or criminal actions, depending on the the AG's, the Attorney General's, perception about the best approach to take for that business. However, we also expect outside of business we may, we all may encounter individuals who

choose to ignore public health measures in places like parks or grocery stores. You know, in the end, we all have to rely on our own judgment, our own personal style and what we're comfortable with about how to respond to those. If it's an innocuous things sometimes a simple reminder or sharing information with someone would be beneficial. But some of us don't want to go that far. And it is fine to just walk away and particularly if someone is appearing difficult or aggressive in in any action like that. You know, we certainly at the health district, we do encourage you to just walk away, pay attention to, you know, taking care of yourself and your family and moving on. We're all eager to get back to a more normal routine with work, education and recreational activities and to relieve some of this economic stress that has been placed on so many people who are suffering under this current emergency. The fastest way to get there, though, is to keep coronavirus under control, because if we don't we're going to face future needs for social distancing. So to the extent we can avoid that, it's really in our best interest to try to take care of as much of that as we can upfront and just make sure you're keeping yourself, your loved ones, and your community safe.

So before I turn it over to Lois, I want to thank her and Sno-Isle Libraries for their partnership with the health district. Last year we signed a memorandum of understanding for Sno-Isle Libraries to be a key player in public health emergencies to serve as points of distribution. These are places where medications or vaccinations could be distributed or administered on a mass basis through a public location that's convenient for individuals in that, living in that region and the county. So if we needed, we could work together to use their locations to quickly distribute medications or supplies on a large scale in an emergency. From the beginning of this pandemic Sno-Isle has offered to support the Health District however needed and, as announced yesterday, Sno-Isle Libraries has allowed us to stand up our mobile testing site this week at their Monroe branch. This has been a great opportunity to test general plans developed last year under that MOU and we're most grateful to the entire team at Sno-Isle for this. So with that, I'm delighted to turn it over to their executive director Lois Langer Thompson. Lois.

Lois Langer Thompson: Thank you so much. Thank you, county executive Somers and Dr. Spitters for your leadership, your support and all you're doing to help us and coordinate with us to stop the spread of the virus. I want to say that we closed all 23 of our libraries on March 13 and we also pulled our library on wheels, which goes out to communities without library access and to nursing homes. But we were of course able to keep our online services going 24-7 and we have Wi Fi available in our parking lots. And as Dr. Spitters announced we will be doing testing at some of our libraries coming up. We're making all the decisions about services based on using the latest science based information. And we're also using our vision that everyone in our community is connected to their library. So we've been working on adapting our library services and to innovate and pivot swiftly so that people can continue to access their library services.

So I'll talk a little bit about our services to library customers. We have extended online access 24-7 at www.sno-isle.org, that's S-N-O-hyphen-I-S-L-E-dot-org. We have made it easier to get a library card, you can apply online and have it immediately to access the online resources. We've increased the number of eBooks eMagazines and movies that we are purchasing and also the number that you can check out and as a result of that we've seen a 22% increase in our digital circulation since March 14. We also have a lot of online learning resources through lynda.com. You can learn to play a piano, you can learn Excel, you can learn a language, just about anything you want to do is on lynda.com and that is free for you to use. We're also very

committed to serving as an economic recovery center to help people access government aid and services to develop their work plans for their small business to learn new skills, whether that's in person when we reopen or you can call or go online to view those services. We also have a whole bunch of fun ways for you to engage and learn. We have stay at home story times twice a week. And it's not just for kids. I've watched it myself. And it's a lot of fun to have someone read to you and sing with you. So it really is for all ages. We have book clubs and writers groups online. And we also, our most popular has been our online Pub Trivia, and we do want for families and one for adults only so look for those signups. As I mentioned, we have Wi Fi access in our library parking lots. We have seen lots of people drive in, keeping a safe social distance and as the weather warms you're welcome to come in person, again, using appropriate social distancing and log in. A fun fact is that of the Wi Fi being used over 50% has gone through Zoom as people are connecting with work and their families during this time. And then, of course, we have our wonderful library staff ready to assist. You can call us at 360-651-7000 or visit us online.

And also, just a quick shout out, our colleagues in the Everett public library, which has two libraries and serves the city of Everett, they are also providing many of the same services. We're also getting ready for summer reading and we know it will be different than it has been in the past, but we will have a kickoff on June 15 and we look forward to welcoming students and their families. And we also wanted to be sure as a part of the community that we continue to build our community connections and reach out to customers. To date we have called just over 6,000 customers to check in with them to see what they're doing, to see how they're doing, to see if they need any help with technology or just someone to talk with and it has been an extremely positive experience for both our staff and our community. And our community partnerships continue just as strong as ever, with the Snohomish and Island counties and the Communities of Color Coalition we continue to promote the 2020 census. And although the date has been extended to October 31, we join in making sure that everyone is counted in Snohomish and Island counties. We're also working with the Boys and Girls Club of Snohomish County, the Snohomish STEM Network, and the Seattle Storm hopefully for some summer reading fun activities. We've been working very closely with our local schools, helping them access e-book titles, providing online tutoring and help for parents as they're educating at home. And we are piloting student account cards with local school districts to ensure ease of access. And as Dr. Spitters mentioned, we are a community partner with Snohomish County Health District to provide rapid tests in our parking lot.

One of the biggest questions we get is when can I return those physical materials I have at home, and we know you're anxious to return them, but we are currently following CDC and government regulations and we cannot accept returns at this time. The best information we have is to quarantine those items for 72 hours as it's not completely clear how long the virus lasts on the materials. So as soon as we're able to accept return of materials, we will let you know. As mentioned, libraries are in phase three of the governor's phased approach. So we're working to understand if libraries can offer contactless curbside pickup sooner than that, but we are waiting for clear guidance as was mentioned earlier. We are also spending a lot of time planning for reopening. We will do a deep cleaning again before we reopen to the public. We will have very limited access and it will be a phased approach, but rest assured that plans are underway and the staff and we are more than excited about welcoming all of you back.

So as I close, one of our trustees said that library staff are naturally curious and we are in a curious time. So this suits us very well. We continue to explore new and innovative ways to connect everyone to their library and we look forward to future conversations about the need for equitable access to digital, for digital resources in our community. And in everything we do, we are guided by the principles and consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion. And with that, I will close and look for any questions.

Dave Somers: So Lois, there's a question really for you. You touched on some of it. But the question is, myEdmonds news published a letter to the editor that suggests that Sno-Isle should reopen book pickup lines twice a week for drive-in pickup and reopen for all on May 9 and your thoughts on that, and there's a comment that the letter reflects frustration, which I think we all understand.

Lois Langer Thompson: Well, I love that people really want us to open. That makes me really happy that that's one of the calls we're getting. But we are following the governor's phased approach. We're in phase three, and so we will not go ahead of that. There, as noted in phase one curbside for retail is listed. It is not clear if libraries are included in that. So we are working with the governor's office to understand that clarity around it. But we're anxious to open and get services back to our customers as well.

Dave Somers: I'd just like to address the frustration issue and I know a lot of people are feeling it. We're all wanting it back to normal. But that's not going to be possible for a while and the worst case scenario is we just drop our protection measures and open up too soon and too quickly and we get a rebound in the virus and people, our numbers start going back up again. It's going to be harder next time around. If we go into another peak or spike, it's going to be extremely difficult on businesses and families and everyone and we don't want to see that. So the measures that are in place and the kind of slow rollout of things is vitally essential to getting back to normal. It's really the only pathway we have, and I know, I totally understand the frustration. On one side, people are very worried for their families and friends and the virus and the other side people are very worried about their livelihoods and their jobs and their businesses, and those two things are both valid, valid points, but we've got to find a pathway that addresses both. And that's I think the path we're on. So, just ask people to be patient and really know that your health care professionals are helping us chart the best path forward. So any other questions?

Joint Information Center: This is Kari in the joint Information Center. I'd like to give it a minute more because I know it can take a moment for folks to type in the questions. Oh there we go. We've got one.

Dave Somers: Doctor, I think probably for you. How concerned are you about the IHME model?

Chris Spitters: There we go. So the IHME, which is the Institute for Health metrics and evaluation at the University of Washington, has done some modeling work that predicted nationwide and state by state of epidemic curves and estimating the total number of people who would be infected and the number of deaths and the hospitalizations. And their most recent update, which I confess I just skimmed, but the gist of it is that it roughly doubled the number of anticipated deaths nationwide and I think it said, you know, by the time we get to the other end of this more like 130,000 deaths, which is roughly double what's occurred to date. And so there's no change in concern. You know, the model updated. I think that their earlier versions, you know, I'm not a modeler, but I think some other modelers thought they were a little bit

conservative or optimistic in their projections so this one, I think, this round is a little bit more in line with some of the other models that are out there. You know, it's important to remember these are just really tools to help, one, give us an idea of roughly where things are going within broad, I think a relatively broad range of confidence about where exactly the numbers are going, but it just gives us a general idea and certainly helps us in public health and I think other aspects of government and commerce plan going forward, but I don't feel any differently about the COVID-19 epidemic after having looked at that than before. It's, you know, we're still on this course of trying to control things, open things up slowly without having too much of a rebound, trying to keep the hospital system functioning and minimizing morbidity and mortality. None of that's really changed by having read that, I think that their numbers were just adjusted upwards, a little bit based on some of the mobility data in the past few weeks, showing that people are moving around a little bit more, that the downside of the curve has flattened a bit. It certainly has in Snohomish County for a couple weeks now. We're averaging about 30 cases a day after we had had a steady decline from 100 down to 30 that occurred over the prior couple weeks. So I think it's some of those kind of features are feeding into it. And there you have it.

Dave Somers: Just a further comment, I follow a number of models too, I think it's my biology background, I love that stuff. But the IHME model did revise upward based on loosening social distancing measures that are happening, but it still assumes that protective measures are going to be in place, the testing and contact tracing and quarantine and other things. So it just emphasizes how important it is for us to maintain these measures in this slow rollout and social distancing. Because there's best cases and there's worst cases as best we know from the science, and worst case is really bad. We don't want to go there. So I use those kind of as guidance on what we should be thinking about and planning for and you know models change as you put new data in them, but they are useful to kind of think through what we need to do and how we need to do it so I appreciate that work out of UW.

There was another question about a local barber opening up based on comments from the sheriff. How are you going to counter that type of thinking? Well, doing exactly what we're doing, urging people to maintain social distancing protections, wash your hands. I personally think that some of our stores requiring face coverings is a useful thing and when you do that. And I think just trying to put out the word that we all want to get back to normal. And we're trying to chart a path that gets us there as quickly as we can and safely as we can. I think that's all we can really do get the message out. The question, will you move to shut down the barber's business? I'm not aware of any actions to do that. And I don't know who would do that, perhaps the health district.

Chris Spitters: Well, you know, that's certainly, am I audible here? It's, it's certainly disheartening and yet, you know, I mean I, we understand the pressures maybe that that particular merchant's under Many merchants are suffering now, and all kinds of folks who can't run their business or go to work. So that's an understandable sentiment. And yet as executive Somers mentioned, as much as possible, we're trying to encourage everybody to kind of stay on the train and practice social distancing. So when departures like that occur, the state has a robust complaint system. And as I stated earlier, the agency that has oversight of the business will be in contact with them. And you know, for those who want their businesses to open up quicker, again, I think the best, the best pathway there, as executive Somers has said is to get the number of cases down, keep them down, open up slowly in an orderly and well-orchestrated and monitored fashion with all of the wraparound public health efforts and continued social

distancing outside those work venues. And I think, you know, we can move ahead, not with any guarantee, but with great confidence that we're doing the best we can get down the road. So there you have it.