

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

Executive Dave Somers: Thank you all for joining us this morning. I was hoping to make an announcement this morning about our application to move to phase two. But we have not yet heard from the Department of Health. We understand their recommendations are have been delivered the governor. We do expect to hear today a little bit later on and we'll let everybody know just as soon as we get the word. I know everybody's impatient, as I am. Every day matters for businesses and workers, small business owners, families. As soon as we know something we'll be letting you know, getting the word out far and wide.

If we are approved move to phase two, which I'm very hopeful that we will be, we must all still continue to follow the key health guidance we've been talking about, practicing social distancing, wearing face covering in public, keep washing your hands. And we really need to keep those protective measures in place to keep the curve flat and low so we'll be emphasizing that message. So with that, I have nothing else. With that, I will hand it over to Dr. Spitters from a Snohomish Health District.

Chris Spitters: Thank you Executive Somers and good morning everyone. So while we're anxiously awaiting the decision on our variance request to move to phase two, I'd like to focus on three items briefly this morning. First, the health district's next steps on making testing available to add on to the existing testing capacity available through the clinical services in the county. A couple of mentions about some general trends on recent data, and reminders about new guidelines.

So first, with regard to testing in the community. With the cares act funding, we are significantly expanding testing operations this month and anticipate continuing to do so through the summer, remembering that testing is a key component of those suppression efforts as we begin to try to open up society, have more contact. That increases the risk of transmission and so we want to, even more than before, be able to identify cases, quickly isolate them, and get their contacts notified and quarantined as well. So the team is finalizing plans now and we hope to have more details out by Monday to share with you. We will be moving to a stationary site for much of June, similar to the operations at Memorial Stadium that occurred earlier in the year. There will be some evening and weekend options, and it will be a location close to transit. So between that combination of features, hopefully we can make it accessible to anyone who needs it. Testing will continue to be available for anyone reporting symptoms of COVID-19, for example, fever, cough, difficulty breathing, sore throat, body aches, or loss of taste or smell. And again, I want to influence anyone that has symptoms like that right now should be seeking testing through their personal health care provider, an urgent care clinic, or through one of the Health District testing sites. This includes but is not limited to those over age 60, individuals who have underlying health conditions that make them more likely to have a severe case or need hospitalization, as well as people with compromised immune systems. Also eligible for testing are people without symptoms who are close contacts have a recent confirmed case, those who live in a congregate setting, group settings like homeless shelters, long term care facilities, group homes, etc., or who work in a location that has had an outbreak, meaning two or more cases connected in space and time over less than two weeks. Going forward, we're also looking to include other asymptomatic individuals that are at higher risk or who work in jobs where outbreaks may be occurring at their workplace would be of particular concern. Examples would be healthcare, first responders, and others who work in close quarters or work with vulnerable populations. So again, please look for more details on health district testing sites coming in

June. Early next week we should have that posted for you and we'll mention it again on the Tuesday briefing.

A brief mention of data. Those of you who see our daily counts see a somewhat bumpy but continued gradual decline in reported cases that continues, and now we've had three in the last seven days with case reports just down in the single digits. So all good news there. As well as new long term care outbreak seem to be winding down in number, and we're only seeing one or two or even less per week now. Going forward, we're planning on more involvement with workplace associated outbreaks, which as I alluded to earlier seem likely to pick up as economic activity begins to resume.

New guidelines. I highlighted this on Tuesday, but again I think it merits repeating. Beginning next Monday, June 8, all employees in their work settings in the state of Washington are required by the governor to work require, excuse me, required by the governor to wear a cloth facial covering and the health district endorses that requirement. Exceptions are when someone's working alone in an office, vehicle, or at a job site where they have no contact with other people, and then if they come out of their office and, you know, go elsewhere in the building or have a meeting, they should remain distanced physically, at least six feet from everyone else, and don a cloth face covering in that moment. Employers must provide cloth facial coverings to employees unless safety and health rules and guidance from the Department of Labor and Industries indicate that their exposure dictates a higher level of protection. So for instance, a healthcare worker instead of a cloth face cover needs to have on a surgical mask or even a higher efficiency filtering facemask. Employees may choose to wear their own facial cloth, cloth facial coverings at work, provided it meets the minimum requirements set forth in the governor's direction. Employers also must post signage at the place of business strongly encouraging customers to wear cloth facial coverings. Businesses are not required to exclude patrons who decline to wear a cloth face covering, but they're certainly free to do so and I don't think that's a bad idea in the interest of protecting the staff as well as other patrons.

So with that, I'd like to turn it over to Brian Nielsen with Washington State Department of Transportation to share a few updates from his end.

Brian Nielsen: Morning. Thank you, executive Somers and Dr. Spitters for having me here with you today. I'm Brian Nielsen, the Deputy Regional Administrator for the Washington State Department of Transportation. I'm responsible for maintenance, traffic operations, engineering design and construction for state highways, including I-5 in Snohomish County. I intend to address a couple of topics with you today that will interest folks who live, work and travel in the area.

The first is summer construction, how we are implementing new measures to ensure crew safety and reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. With Snohomish County's phase two variance under consideration by the Department of Health, there are additional activities that could move forward soon. The second is work zone safety and with construction and maintenance crews working on the road, we need help from each of you to ensure everyone gets home safely at the end of the day. And we'll open to questions after that.

So summer is our busy season for construction. Our efforts largely focus on preservation of our existing highways, so they can continue to rely, be reliable for commuters and freight haulers. We also have a significant amount of work to remove barriers for migratory fish and improve habitat underneath the highways this summer. Additionally, there are safety enhancements that

are planned in various locations. As with anything WSDOT does, our priority is safety for all involved. As provided under Washington's smart, Washington's safe start phase one, there are low risk activities already underway with specific COVID-19 health and safety plans in place. These plans require a control measures such as screening workers for signs and symptoms of COVID before they enter the job site, maintaining six feet of separation between people on site, the use of proper personal protective equipment based – face coverings, gloves and eye protection – and sanitizing and hygiene practices. We wipe down common touch areas and provide hand washing stations for our crew.

Snohomish County is, if Snohomish County's variance is approved that would allow phase two activities on construction sites. For our work, the biggest difference phase one to phase two is that phase two activities can be performed where it isn't possible to maintain the six feet of distancing between workers, and in those cases more robust face coverings will be used.

Touch on some projects in the area that people can see, will expect to see this summer, starting with US-2. We will continue the paving on US-2 between Bickford Avenue and Gold Bar. This work began last year and should be completed this summer. Also between Bickford Avenue and the SR-9 interchange, a new medium barrier, excuse me, a median barrier will be installed. Further east on US-2 our contractor will rehabilitate bridge decks on US-2 between Gold Bar and Skykomish to extend the life of those bridges. We began work on that project last month under phase one and we will continue when the phase two variance is approved. On SR-9 in Arlington our contract will complete the installation of a new single lane roundabout on 108th Avenue northeast in Marysville. That workload should start later this month or in early July. And we're also working on SR-530 east of Arlington to remove fish barriers and restore natural habitat.

Roadwork by our contractors and our maintenance crews are vital to keeping goods and people moving in our state. We need your help to ensure everyone in our work zones and those traveling through can go home safely. Employees in work zones are husbands, fathers, brothers wives, mothers, sisters, children and friends, they all deserve to go home safe at the end of their shift.

Since 1950, 60 WSDOT employees have been killed on the job. They leave behind families, friends and co workers who are never the same. If you need to get behind the wheel, please make sure your full attention is on the road and you're capable of operating a vehicle safely. That means free of distractions like using a cell phone or other devices, not driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol or fatigue by lack of rest. When driving, be on the lookout for orange construction markers and reduce your speed as indicated by signs and flaggers. We're counting on you to keep our workers safe this summer.

With that, I will open for questions.

Dave Somers: Thank you, Brian. I think the first question really is for Dr. Spitters. The question is, there have been several large protests in the county in the last few days, how concerned are you about these leading to a spike in cases? And what is your message to those who choose to take part in protests in the county?

Chris Spitters: Well certainly the potential for transmission to occur in a large gathering like that is there. And we've seen no signal of that as of this time, it might be a little bit early to know because if you think that the average time to getting ill after being exposed is four to six days, it

can be as long as two weeks, and then it's usually another day to day or two to get tested and then for us to learn about the positive results. So the minimum amount of time after any gathering that we would expect to see any detectable increase in cases would be a week. Given that the, at least from what I'm seeing, the attendees tend to be on the younger end of the age spectrum, but not exclusively so, but it's largely a younger population, it's possible that if there was an increase in cases and they had mild illness and didn't seek testing, it could be another generation of cases another week or two down the line. So in some it could take anywhere from a minimum of one week to three weeks or so, let's say, to see if there's any increase in transmission associated with these gatherings.

Nevertheless, I think the key messages for those of you who are going out to protest is to be safe, wear a cloth face covering to protect those around you, the others wearing cloth face coverings will protect you, carry hand sanitizer. And to the extent possible, try to avoid direct physical contact and certainly keep a space buffer between you and other people who are out there with you and follow all the other prevention guidance that we've been setting out before.

Dave Somers: The second question is directed at me. If the governor does grant phase two today, what is the start date for the county and what is the county going to do to ensure compliance beyond having people report non compliance? So we are hoping and assuming that the effect of the green light to go into phase two will begin immediately. We don't have verification of that from the state, but that's my assumption, that it's been the case in other counties where the state has given the green light to move into the next phase, so very hopeful that we'll be essentially starting tomorrow. That's my, that's my hope. If it's any different, we will let you know as soon as we hear from the governor's office. In terms of enforcement, again, we will hopefully have people report businesses that are not complying, we'll look at all the tools we have available. I was in error at our last gathering, the county for some time had stopped business licensing, but we do issue some business licenses. So withdrawing business licenses is one option. If it's a restaurant or food business, the Health District has some tools at its, that it can use to allow businesses to continue or not. Clear up to action by the state attorney general, as we saw in Snohomish. So we'll look at the nature of the offense and try to do something proportionate. But at the end of the day, really, to be successful, we have limited capacity to enforce. We're going to be really relying on people to really support those businesses that are doing the right thing and trying to protect your health, and if they clearly are not and are violating the rules, we ask you not to frequent them, do not support those businesses. This is important to us all. It's important not only for our economy, but for public health. So we're going to ask our residents really to self enforce as much as possible.

And next question is for Dr. Spitters. As we move in phase two, what does the Health Department think will happen to COVID spread and new cases?

Chris Spitters: Well, you know, none of us have been here before. And we're out at the leading edge for the country. So I think, you know, we look to those successful models from around the world that have tried to reopen society, and those that seem to have done it successfully do a lot of testing and rigorous contact notification and quarantine efforts. And so certainly, as I said earlier, more activity means more people coming in contact with one another. So the potential for transmission to lead to more cases is most certainly going to be there. And our goal at the Public Health Department end is to make sure that testing is widely available and that we have people understand if you have any symptoms, go get tested. And then we do our part to notify people with positive results of their need to stay home and identify, then we identify their

contacts, talk to them about staying home. And so that's the goal. More human activity, more human contact, but we'll try to control transmission. And then for all of you out there, the general community is to continue to do everything you can to reduce your chance of acquiring or spreading. Wear a face covering when in public. Wash your hands frequently, certainly before eating, when you get home, and then carry hand sanitizer with you and have it readily available in your workplace, use that a lot. And stay six feet or more away from everybody as much as possible.

The next question is, in previous weeks we've seen counties get approved for phase two within a day of submitting an application. What do you think has slowed the application process for Snohomish County?

And I'll start and then turn it over to you, Dr. Spitters. We got new criteria and a new application process on Sunday afternoon. Turned the application around, we had been preparing, the Health District in my department emergency management and others had been preparing an application all through last week and before, so we had to reformat. It was submitted at the end of the day on Monday. I was hopeful we'd get a quick turnaround, also, but, you know, in retrospect, we're four days later. It seems like a month, but it's four days. And I do know that apparently there's six counties total applying to go into phase two. And there's a number of counties applying to go into phase three, so I suspect there's several factors. Just more counties in the pipeline looking to move on to the next phase, the application process is a little bit new, and also we're larger counties now that the state is having to look at and look at in total. I know King County is looking at a partial Phase one B, if you will. We're looking at full phase two. I know some counties to the north also applied and so I think it's just the complexity of the application, the number of counties, and just where we are. So Dr. Spitters, you may have more specific information.

Chris Spitters: Executive Somers, you know, I don't have anything to add. I think it's just as you mentioned, and the Department of Health and the governor's office trying to do their due diligence to look over all those applications that are coming in, give them a fair assessment, and then get back to us. And we're anxiously awaiting.

Joint Information Center: This is Kari in the Joint Information Center. Oh, there we go. We have another question. I was going to say we'll give it a minute, so.

Dave Somers: So can you expand at all on where the new testing site may be, Dr. Spitters?

Chris Spitters: Well, you know, that the planning activity for that is delegated. It'll be somewhere, you know, in the I-5 or State Route 99 corridor that's accessible by public transportation. You know, likely to be closer to the more urban core of the, of the county for sustainability. And we'll have more information for you next week.

Joint Information Center: This is Kari again, I'd like to give it a minute or two more just to make sure if someone's still typing their question in that we don't miss it. And then in a couple of minutes, if we don't see additional questions, we will go ahead and wrap up.

We are still not seeing any other questions. I know a minute feels extremely long when it's silent on Zoom.

Dave Somers: Kari, just got a phone message that we've been approved for phase two.

Joint Information Center: Whoa. How's that for timing.

Dave Somers: And I accidentally just hung up on my director of emergency management.

Joint Information Center: OK, so it sounds like we have some news on that. I don't know how many details we have. We're close to wrapping up here. I don't know, executive or Dr. Spitters, if you would like to give some comments? If not, we can certainly, we certainly will be releasing more information as soon as possible.

Dave Somers: Why don't, why don't we hold on just a second and I'll get Jason back on the line.

Joint Information Center: Thank you all for your patience. I think, we didn't expect to get this call right at the end of the availability.

Dave Somers: So, all right, we'll be getting an official letter within the next 15 minutes and we'll have all the details and so will be getting those out just as quickly as we get the letter. That's the official news. I'm very.

Joint Information Center: Well, thank you all again for joining us. I know that was a bit of an exciting wrap up there. But as the executive said, it sounds like we'll have more details coming in, in the next 15 minutes, half hour or so. So please stay tuned. We will get you an update as soon as we can. With that, I'm going to go ahead and wrap up so that the executive and Dr. Spitters can turn their attention to the information that's coming on the application approval. So thank you all again and we will have more information for you soon.

Dave Somers: Thank you all.

Chris Spitters: Thank you.

Brian Nielsen: Thank you.