

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, June 9, 2020, Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: Thank you and good morning. I really want to touch on two subjects today. First, we're all very excited to get the green light to move into phase two on Friday, and we started to see some businesses opening immediately. We really expect to see more businesses open as they get their protective measures and change in place and make the necessary changes they need to make. So very excited about that. And I know that the general mood around Snohomish County is upbeat about that and I think people are really grateful to be seeing businesses start to hope. And so we just urge everybody to be very aware with when they go into a business, they should wear face coverings and make social distancing to the maximum extent possible. So we really do not want to see a spike. We have a three week monitoring period before we can possibly move into phase three, which we would very much like to do, but we really need to have those protections still in place, people being cautious. Do not want to see a spike and we're hopeful that if we can keep the numbers low and declining that we will be able to move into phase three as quickly as possible.

The second issue I really wanted to touch on briefly is the murder of George Floyd and our community's response. First of all, I've got to say I'm extremely heartened by all the outpouring of outrage frankly and the peaceful marches and protests and events that we've had throughout the county, out here in east county, Monroe, Snohomish, Everett, Lynnwood, Edmonds. Throughout the county we've seen really an outpouring of concern and the demand for change in our institutions and in our society. And so I'm very heartened by that. I think we are a caring community. And that it's really shown over the last week or two. But I do want to say I was very concerned about what I saw in Snohomish a week ago with the gathering of many, many armed citizens, there was, it's unfortunately described by the mayor and the police chief as a festive atmosphere with mostly young men wearing, sporting semi automatic rifles. There was drinking in the streets. There was burning of rubber, car tires. You can still see the marks in downtown Snohomish. And the whole event was joined by some good meetings citizens and, in certain business over owners who had been alerted of the possibility of and antifa attack which turned out was bogus and contrived. We had the known presence of white nationalist groups that actually triggered that event, and were very present in the forefront in our communities. And this concerns me deeply. Vigilante justice is, is not welcome here in Snohomish County. We have a law enforcement criminal justice system, our sheriff's deputies are fully capable and trained, our police departments are capable and trained of controlling situations, we have a court system, we have a jail, we have a prosecuting attorneys, we have public defenders. We have a whole system to deal with these types of events and any issues. We do not need citizen vigilante justice to spring up. It was a very dangerous situation. We're very fortunate that it didn't really turn far worse. So as we move forward, we know that we have institutional racism issues to deal with in many of our institutions, county government is no different than any others. But I'm really hopeful that the recent events with George Floyd's death and others will really trigger some change in our society and our institutions and I'm talking with community leaders about next steps and things that we really need to put in place. I think we do need to take this renewed focus and energy and make some long lasting changes in our community, our institutions, our nation and hopefully our world. And I'm very hopeful that that will happen.

So with that, I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Spitters from the Snohomish Health District.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Thank you, Executive Somers and good morning everyone. Today I have two topics to focus on, phase two looking toward phase three, an a new path forward with

respect to the Snohomish health district's data updates. First regarding phases two and three, now that we're in phase two we've already had questions about what the path to Phase three looks like. The short answer is we just need to keep doing more of the same, more of what we've been doing already. We, as executive Somers mentioned, we need to wait at least three weeks until we're eligible to apply. Why the three week waiting period? Well, as I mentioned before, what happens today in the community with respect to transmission of the virus won't show up in our numbers for one to three weeks. Why is that? Well, remember that the average incubation period from the time a person is exposed till the time they develop symptoms is about four to six days on average. It can be as long as two weeks. Then there's the time from recognizing one has symptoms to seeking testing. Then the specimen goes to the lab, gets analyzed, the result gets generated, that goes back to the doctor and to the patient, as well as to the health department. And so it's generally, you know, the minimum amount of time from exposure to the health district finding out about a new case is roughly seven days. So that's a minimum of one week and sometimes it can stretch out to three weeks if there's a long incubation period or delays in seeking or obtaining testing. So that's our, the time allowance that we need to watch and see what our activities are generating in terms of transmission in the community and remember even three weeks from now it's just measuring what's going on in these moments.

So during these three weeks, we need to maintain the progress we've made so far. Make sure the case counts stay within that 25 cases per hundred thousand per two week period that is the threshold that allowed us into phase two, that hospitals maintain their capacity to take a 20% increase in bed demand do the COVID or other illnesses, and that we're doing enough testing in the community to keep the positivity rate down around 2%. There's nothing magical around, about that 2% figure. It's just that from communities and countries that have had success in controlling the transmission COVID while trying to keep their economy and society somewhat more open, you really need to be doing about 50 tests for every case to feel like you're comfortably doing a good job of detecting the vast majority of cases. And the health district continues to work actively toward expanding its availability of testing for folks in the community, while the medical community and health care system is continuing its previous efforts. At the Health District we're bringing on additional staff to help us toward achieving the time windows for reaching cases within 24 hours of us being notified and reaching their contacts within 48 hours of us learning about the original case. And then finally we're counting on residents and businesses to continue helping us hold the line so that case numbers don't increase while the first increment in economic, social and recreational activity takes place under phase two.

You can continue to help the cause by wearing cloth face coverings when out of the home, keeping six feet of physical distance between you and others when out of the home, practicing thorough and frequent hand hygiene, either with hand washing or with hand sanitizer, following the guidelines for phase two and also thinking about others and trying to protect others, especially vulnerable people who are more likely to get sick or need hospitalization if they get infected with the virus.

So again, phase two is not a return to normal, it's a first step in the right direction. It's conceivable that it could take a little bit longer than three weeks for the health district to demonstrate to the Department of Health that it is safe for Snohomish County to move to phase three, but at the Health District we're fully committed. We know our partners in the county and

the rest of government and the health care system are on board with us and we appreciate you, the residents of Snohomish County, likewise, working with all of us toward that next step.

Moving on to data updates. The Department of Health has made several significant investments and improvements in the time and resources to expand their data dashboards describing the COVID situation. On their website they have a statewide dashboard and you can also select specific counties. This adds a lot of good graphic information to what the health district has already been providing and really does a good job of updating the community on a daily basis about what's going on with COVID. Given this and our need to focus our data monitoring and analysis on those numbers I was just discussing, those measures of our success in holding the line in phase two and being ready to move on to phase three, we've really got to turn the focus of our data analysis efforts on that. So beginning this Friday we will, that will be our last daily update from an in house Snohomish Health District case count and that will then shift to the, making a link directly to the Department of Health dashboard to access that very same information.

So before I turn it over to Jonathan, I do want to share a quick message from the health district for all the graduates out there. You and your classmates and families have worked for years to get to this moment. We can only imagine the frustration and disappointment that many are feeling not getting to have a traditional graduation and the celebrations with your family and friends that surround that. Please know that while we can't have the graduation ceremonies that you all deserve, we are incredibly proud of the class of 2020 for stepping up and showing up during this pandemic. And this hardship that you are enduring will make you stronger and better prepared to deal with disappointments and setbacks that you will encounter in the future. The Health District wishes you, your classmates, and your families the very best in your future achievements. Congratulations.

Jonathan.

Jonathan Kwong: Thank you for that message and also thank you for having me. So yeah, I'm Jonathan Kwong. I'm a senior at Mountlake Terrace High School. And one of the things as a senior people usually tell all of us is to make the most of our senior year, and I guess it really took on a new meaning to that this year.

So we did most of our typical things in the beginning of the year like applying for colleges, looking for jobs, searching for apprenticeships, and while we had Homecoming and we were working on coordinating concert schedules and field trips for our winter and spring quarter the school closed. And I think the next two to three weeks after school closure was the hardest because our district and school administrators were preparing to switch to remote learning and our teachers we're restructuring their curriculums as we students were beginning to realize that all the activities we were looking forward to like field trips, performances, prom, moving up assemblies, and even graduation at that time we thought weren't going to happen. And I think for me, I overcame one of the lockdowns easier than some people was because I had a really busy schedule because as a STEM student at Mountlake Terrace High we have to do a senior project on a STEM related topic in order to complete the program. And so two weeks before our first virtual science fair, which is CSRSEF, the central sound regional science and engineering fair, all schools closed and then the fair, the science fair became a virtual fair where regional science fair merged with the state science fair. And we had to do it all remotely. Overall, it was really interesting experience because instead of our typical board presentations we had to

present it using slide decks. So it was also playing a lot with technology, playing a lot with how we would present things without being able to give physical models to people and overall our school placed very well with seven projects placing first and one of those projects qualifying and advancing to the International Science Fair. And it's really nice to see all these achievements even during such hardships.

And one of the other reasons I became really busy was I was also the editor in chief our school's yearbook and the sudden school closure threw our plans totally off course and in order to get the yearbook up and running again and we had to overcome a lot of technical barriers, reshuffle some content around, the yearbook to cover everything from COVID to virtual classroom to graduation, and somehow make up for the few pictures we have for spring sports.

And speaking of graduation, I actually really want to thank everyone from the school district to all the staff and faculty at our school for the amount of work and thought they put into giving us a really memorable graduation, no matter what. So starting from like picking up our caps and gowns, we were allowed to do a drive through pickup. And all the teachers and staff came out with personally decorated signs and balloons and congratulated us with loud cheers from the sidewalk as we drove off. And it was a really emotional send off and all of us really appreciated seeing our teachers one more time as a high school student. And while we usually as high school in the Edmonds district have a commencement ceremony at the Edmonds stadium, this year we got to have our commencement ceremony at our own schools and actually last Wednesday we did the recording for our virtual graduation ceremony and it was one family per car and each of us drove around the school. So at the back of the school, the counselors passed out graduation cords and cheered us on as we drove to the front of the school where we arrived at the roundabout, and then the graduate gets off, gets their diploma from the principal, and then we walk onto a stage to get our graduation photo taken. And then once we got back into our cars and drove away from the school, the parent boosters club gave us farewell goodie bags that they put together with local companies. And it was filled with like a class mug, a grad cap cookie, and then a bunch of candy and a face mask and it was just really sweet idea for them to put that together.

And actually, yesterday I went back to school for the last time, to return by Chromebooks, my textbooks, and collect the items we had left in our lockers. And I don't think it really felt like high school was coming to an end until yesterday, but when it was time to return my Chromebook and textbooks it was a sudden realization like oh, this is the last time I'm going to go to school as a student. And even so, we're just on the campus around the school. We don't actually get to go into the school building. So it was nice for that and I'm thankful that our commencement ceremony will be broadcasted online this Saturday at 10am and we'll all be watching physically distant but virtually together. So, yeah.

Dave Somers: Right. Thank you, Jonathan, and from the class of 70 to the class of 20, I just wish you all the best and know great success and a fantastic future. I know you're going to go to the UW, planning and go to UW and go huskies. So thank you, Jonathan. And again, congratulations.

So got a couple questions. First one is for me. Do you support calls for redistributing half of the sheriff's budget to housing, counseling, and social services? I do not support an arbitrary reallocation of dollars. What I do support and what we actually started on last year was an examination of our entire criminal justice system. In Snohomish County, currently about 77% of

our general fund budget goes to the criminal justice system. When I started on the county council in 1998 it was about 56% so it's grown over the years to a huge chunk of our budget. And that system includes the sheriff's office, the jail, our court system, prosecuting attorneys, public defenders, the clerk's office and others so it is truly a system. And I think what we need to do is have a conversation or a further conversation about roles and responsibilities and who does what best. And we've recognized for quite some time that we ask our law enforcement officers to be not only law enforcement officers but mental health responders and medical responders and family counselors and are interjected into very complex situations. And frankly, I think, you know, we started down the path last year of teaming up social workers with the teams with law enforcement professionals out in the field to contact and work with some of our homeless population, get them services, and I think we need to sort of strengthen those efforts.

Unfortunately, the reality is, even if the county took its 1% property tax increase, which is about seven cents on your property tax dollars, 1% of that, we would still be falling behind. So we're really shrinking as a government. We're about 140 people short, lower number than we were in 2008 and that's going to continue. So we really have a collision of sort of dwindling resources relative to our county size and the roles and responsibilities people expect us to perform for them. So we will engage the sheriff's office, the whole criminal justice system and our county council ultimately makes the budget decisions to decide the best way to distribute funds and work together as a team. And I think we need to relook at the team and who is best suited to do what, so it's not a simple 50/50 kind of decision or action that we take. We are going to have to figure this out as a team.

Next question is for Dr. Spitters. And it's more information from WHO, World Health Organization, regarding potential risk of people without symptoms to spread COVID. Is that still considered a risk? And also statewide there's been a larger case number increase in the past three days. Anything to be concerned about at this point?

Chris Spitters: Okay, let's take that those one at a time then. I have seen the headline of the WHO, I'm not sure if it's guidance or report that they've found some, some countries have found the lower transmission rate from asymptomatic individuals through their contact investigations. So first, I'd have to review the, the actual original WHO document which I haven't done yet but I would just as a broad feature regarding all, you know, medical science, there's no single report or, you know, guideline or commentary that drives or changes the needle in general. I think we still know from empiric experience that transmission from asymptomatic people does occur. It's certainly less than someone who's coughing and sneezing. But, you know, I don't think that this report from WHO is going to change anything in the next few days in how we do things and, you know, the scientific discourse will play out over time. And, you know, facts love time and time loves facts. So over time, if that finding really holds up across multiple settings you may see that somehow affect our disease control efforts, but right now it's just another piece of information on the map about COVID and transmission.

Statewide there's been a larger case number in the past three days, anything to be concerned about? Well, certainly anytime case numbers are increasing that's going to be a concern because it's a signal of increased transmission, potentially. I would encourage you, though, if you, if you do go to that Washington State Department of Health website and look at it and go down to the county level I think what you'll see is that Snohomish, King and Pierce and in the Puget Sound area are our kind of flat, more or less, and a couple of, particularly Yakima County is really in a dire situation right now and their case counts are increasing. And so some of that is

what you're witnessing statewide is a, is a putting together of findings from different settings. So things seem kind of level in Puget Sound and kind of still going up in central Washington and eastern Washington overall as a group. That's not to, you know, deflect any blame or concern on them, we're really concerned about what's happening there because we're all one state and people move around and increased cases in one place can become increased numbers of cases elsewhere including here as people move around. But I think that it's premature for us to draw any conclusions about the initial days of Phase two, or even the result of people gathering for the protests at this point. So I would say, stay tuned on that. And when you do see a statewide increase or decrease I encourage you to kind of click around and take a look at the different larger counties in the various regions and see if that helps you sort it out.

Dave Somers: Jump to the question for Jonathan. Jonathan, what was your science fair project and how are emotions running with your friends, and after UW, what's next for you?

Jonathan Kwong: My [science fair project](#). Okay. My science fair project was titled Testing Effectiveness of Auxin-augmented Arabidopsis thaliana in Phytoremediation of Floodwater Contaminants. What I essentially looked at was, I was looking at using a plant to filter floodwater. And I was adding plant hormone to see if it would, to see the effectiveness of that plant hormone in causing the plant to uptake more contaminants or less contaminants. And I did it in a controlled environment, I built a, I built a hydroponic system which is basically a water garden. And then I did, I looked at three main contaminants that were prevalent, or I found that were prevalent in Washington State, which were arsenic, lead and phosphate and, yeah, I, my project got first place and the best in category for the entire State of Washington. So that was nice. But yeah, it was really hectic during that time because I was almost done with all my data collection and I still needed a microscope and a lab table to do a few more experiments and then it was like two days before the school was announced to be closed, and I was like oh, I gotta rush all this. So I remember getting permission to leave a lot of my classes just to spend most of the school day in the chem storage of my school working on the project. So, yeah.

How are emotions running with my friends? There have been mixed feelings and we have gotten to points where we were like, oh, this pandemic might go on forever. But I think we've been able to get through this together because we've been able to get more in touch and more often. And so like we've created many group chats with different people. We've created like discord channels, we've made sure to like FaceTime, zoom call, Facebook Messenger call a lot of our friends just to like check up on them. And I know a few people would always call me and just do like check up on me and I do the same. And I think it's just that network we create around each other that really helps all of us get through this together.

As for UW. Well, I was accepted to the interdisciplinary Honors Program at UW Seattle, and there I plan to major in biochemistry. And in fact, because of the pandemic I actually requested and they allowed me to start the summer quarter in two weeks. So I'll be starting college nine days after I officially graduate. But after I graduate from college I plan to just go for masters or long term goal wise, I've been really interested in public policy, especially with the school board. I've really gotten an insight into how most of it works. And I really want to continue pursuing that and I want to focus more on like public policy research and probably more like public policy research for the environment. So, yeah.

Dave Somers: Excellent, excellent. Dr. Spitters, there was a question for you. Under phase two, the county must provide weekly updates on its case investigation. Will those be posted on the health district website?

Chris Spitters: So, so we'll, we're developing a dashboard similar to the one that the state has around the safe start reopening and we will use the findings from our weekly reporting to populate, to update that dashboard. And that dashboard essentially mirrors the reporting requirements of the phase two monitoring. So you will see it in that format, indeed.

Dave Somers: Great, and two more, two last questions for you Dr. Spitters. The state set a deadline of June 12 to offer tests to nursing home residents and staff, will the county meet that deadline? And also on Monday, the State Secretary of Health said there are testing supplies and anyone who wants to test, regardless of their symptoms, should feel free to get one if that's what you feel you need to do. Is that a reality today for residents of Snohomish County?

Chris Spitters: Taking those one at a time. The, Secretary Wiesman's directive to skilled nursing facilities and assisted living facilities that have memory care units to conduct testing of all residents and staff members who have not been tested since April one stands, and the target completion for that, date for that is June 12. The party, responsible parties for that are the, the skilled nursing facilities and those memory care units. And so the Health District is available to provide technical consultation, facilitate, that sort of thing, but the answer to that question really lies in the hands of the skilled nursing facilities themselves and the secretary who ordered them to do so. So the Health District is a facilitator and technical assistant in that. Certainly our hope is that they meet that either in the letter or at least in the spirit and get it done quickly. Whether it's the 12th or the 14th or the 15th, I'm not sure that matters as much. But getting it done now makes a lot of sense. And that's why the secretary directed them to do so.

Part two, availability of testing. Yes, certainly. Again, our top priority for testing is if you're out there and you have any of those COVID symptoms, anything from a sore throat, runny nose, cough, fever, lose your sense of taste or smell, have headaches, or vomiting, diarrhea, any of those symptoms that aren't explained by something else, promptly we urge you to get tested as quickly as possible for your own wellbeing, for that the folks around you, and for that of the whole county. And then testing for asymptomatic individuals, again targeted toward close contacts, particularly those who work in high risk settings, outbreak settings, and then as that that guidance that you're quoting mentions, you know, anyone else who feels that a test is the right thing for them. And certainly, you know, our efforts and emphasis again is on people who work in or visit or frequent high risk settings where transmission is ongoing. So healthcare providers, first responders, emergency medical services, and other people working in settings like that. That being said, so if you if you have symptoms or you want to get tested, first stop is your regular source of health care to seek testing. If you're unable to secure it through that or you don't have a regular health care provider, then you should go to the health district website, click on getting tested and you should be able to find a test.

Dave Somers: That wraps us up.

Joint Information Center: It does. This is Kari in the Joint Information Center. Thank you all again for joining us this morning and please do stay tuned for future media availabilities. Thank you.