

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, June 23, 2020, Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: Good morning, and thank you for joining us. As you know, we are just in the first part of our third week and phase two of the reopening plan. And I was out and about yesterday in Snohomish and Lake Stevens and around the county. It's good to see many of our small businesses opening up, it's quite clear that a lot of people are taking precautions. I saw facemasks on most people and businesses that I checked into had done a really good job in setting up social distancing measures and masks and sanitation features. So just kudos to everybody. We've got to keep it up. And we certainly want to move forward. But we are seeing some I guess what I would say are troubling trends with the numbers, both at the state level and locally, and I know Dr. Spitters is going to address that a little bit more. So I really encourage everybody to do all those things we've asked them to do, which is wear facemasks in public and when you're in crowded areas, wash your hands, socially distance. Just be mindful that the virus is still out there. It's very contagious and we want to just keep making progress on that. So good job, but we've got some I guess I would call them yellow lights in terms of our numbers and we will be watching those carefully and we keep in constant contact with the health district and looking at the test results. And I know we'll be getting those throughout the week, what we've seen, any trends we've seen.

The other issue I wanted to mention briefly, as I mentioned last week I have established in an office of social justice in my office. I've got three staff members assigned to it, very significant portion of their time, and we're engaging others, the sheriff's office, prosecuting attorney's office, the public defender's office and others. And that group is meeting as we speak. I've decided they will answer directly to me and my deputy Eric Parks, who is my right hand person in all matters of the county. So that office will answer to me and I'll be very hands on and participating in their discussion. So currently we are prioritizing the actions that I laid out and that others are engaging others in. We'll be coming up with a prioritized action plan for both short and long term action.

Also the County Council held a forum on racism and criminal justice reform last night online. It went from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. A lot of energy and passion behind the issue. I guess I came away with two lessons that were clear to me is, first of all, we've got a long way to go. There's still quite a bit of denial that we have any issues, either in our institutions or in our communities. And the second is, it's quite clear we do have issues of racism, both in our institutions and communities that need to be addressed. But there's a lot of passion and interest by many people to really take action on those and really make some progress. So I'm very hopeful. We see it in Snohomish County, we see it at the state level, national level, and even internationally. So I think there's been an awakening and I'm very optimistic that we're going to make some really real progress in our county in our community. So I'm committed to that and look forward to getting to it.

So with that, I will turn it over to Dr. Spitters.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Thank you, Executive Somers, and good morning everyone. Last Friday, we released our first Snohomish County snapshot. You can see that on the website and that shows our performance and outcomes related to statewide indicators for COVID control. And so, encourage you to take a look at that. I do want to update you on the matter that Executive Somers mentioned and that is we had a, quite a large number of cases reported to the health district yesterday, 75 in total. And that's the largest single day total since 92 cases were

reported on April 9, recalling that, you know, the peak of the outbreak was in late March, early April. So this is a big number of cases, we're still in the process of notifying all those folks, making sure they're isolated, eliciting their contacts, and then trying to find out where they came from to guide our further control efforts. But needless to say, that certainly is a cautious or a caution signal to us to us all. And I'll comment a little bit more on that in just a moment.

I also want to mention we received reports of a large party that occurred over the last weekend with over 50 attendees. You may recall in phase two, the largest allowed gathering is five. And it turns out that one of the guests at that event was symptomatic for COVID, subsequently tested positive. And so now we have over 50 people that the health district is trying to locate and reach out to and advise them about their exposure, get them quarantined and encourage them to get tested. It doesn't appear that masks or social distancing were implemented at that gathering. So we are indeed assuming that all those folks were potentially exposed. So the team is working on that. And that's, I think, just two cautionary tales, one data and the other a story, that we'll continue to do our work to monitor what's going on and try to control and suppress any spread, but I think it does, as executive Somers mentioned, kind of put a flashing yellow light on our progress in the safe start reopening. And, you know, we may not be proceeding at maximum velocity toward phase three. But time will tell in the next few days as we sort through what's going on and also get additional days of data to see if this was just an aberration, or is this a trend. So more to come there.

But I think as we, as I've mentioned before, this safe start paradigm that we're going through, it's not, you know, a one-way street. We've been making progress, but if things don't go well, you know, we can get stalled or we can even end up having to move backward. And toward that end, I want to thank everybody, as Executive Somers mentioned, for all the effort out there to do physical distancing, to do the hand hygiene, to wear the face coverings in public. But I just want to reiterate that for all folks that this is really important going forward, especially as we do try to reopen and have more contact in various settings, the risk of transmission goes up so our defenses against that need to stay up as well. So just reminders about a few things. In phase two, social gatherings are limited to five people outside your home in a seven day period. Please maintain that six foot physical buffer between you and others. Wear cloth face coverings when out of the home, especially when you're indoors in public places like shopping or other indoor public places, but also when you're outdoors and even if you're in a recreation setting, if there's a lot of people around and you cannot maintain a sustained gap of six feet between you and all others, that's a good time to keep one on again. And remembering that this is, that wearing that face covering is, when I do that, I'm protecting you, and when you do that, you're protecting me. It's about all of us working to protect each other. So even if I'm not worried about me getting sick, I can't make that decision for other people. And so that's really why it's important for us all to contribute and wear those coverings when we're out in public. Obviously, good hand hygiene frequent handwashing and then carrying hand sanitizer with you for when you can't access soap and water. And again, if you develop any of those symptoms, sore throat, cough, fever, fatigue, lose your sense of smell, get congestion, anything like that that's not standard for you and is not explained by an existing stable medical diagnosis, please isolate yourself at home and seek testing.

We have five days of testing this week, coming from the health district. All day tomorrow 9am to 4pm and McCollum Park, Wednesday – that's today at McCollum Park nine to four. Tomorrow nine to two at Sno Isle Libraries branch in Monroe. Thursday noon to seven at McCollum Park.

Friday 9am to 2pm at Sno Isle Libraries in Snohomish, and then Saturday again at McCollum Park from 10am to 2pm.

In addition to people with symptoms, we encourage asymptomatic people to get tested if they are a close contact to a confirmed case, if they live or work in a place like a shelter or an assisted living facility or group home, they work in a location, a work location that's had a case, or if they're part of a family or social network that's had a case, as well as people who are first responders, EMS, other work settings with a high risk of exposure, or if you're part of a group that is known to have high rates or poor outcomes, especially many of our racial and ethnic minority groups in the county. And last but not least, people who have required testing for pre procedure preoperative needs for healthcare or sometimes travel related requirements.

Registration can be accessed for our testing sites at www.snohd.org/ncov2019, and you can get registered for the drive through testing at that point.

So thank you for listening. I'd like to turn it back over to the Executive Somers.

Dave Somers: We'll just run down through the questions as we received them. So the first, regarding masks, what is the current health district policy and are they mandated to be worn in public? If not, do you both support a statewide mandate for wearing masks in public? You want to start with that?

Chris Spitters: Certainly. Well, I think my comments just now relay the health district's policy and recommendation that all people wear a face covering when out of the home in a public setting, shopping, what have you. And so that's our, our strong recommendation for the community. We think that's a critical part of moving forward and getting through this. You know, we certainly would support and endorse any, there's a question about if there were a statewide mandate, if such occurred, if the Governor or the Secretary of Health were to issue such an order or proclamation, something like that, we certainly would support that. It's, I think there's a good body of evidence behind supporting that. And so we'll stay tuned in that respect.

Dave Somers: Several questions about the party that you mentioned. What area or community the party was in, how rapidly could the virus spread from that one party, was the individual symptomatic when they went or developed after the party? And just general requests for more information about that.

Chris Spitters: So we believe we have the ability to contact all of the attendees, so we, in the interest of protecting the privacy of the people who attended and naming the location or community where it occurred may, may permit them to be identified and because of their exposure to COVID, then that becomes protected health information that I would be disclosing to you. So because we don't think at this point public notification of the specific place is needed to achieve our disease control, I won't tell you where it occurred but as I said, a large gathering, the individual apparently was symptomatic at the party. And I mentioned that tale less about notification of affected individuals, because as I said I think we're going to be able to reach all of them. But just a reminder gatherings like that are, one, a bad idea, and, two, they're not permitted. And second, if you're not feeling well, don't get together with other people. Stay home and get tested.

Dave Somers: There was a follow up on what do the rising numbers mean for moving to phase three? I'll just start a bit that we had begun the process of developing the application to move to phase three that we would submit to the state. We know what the metrics are. Luckily, the

state's been pretty clear on that. So as the numbers come in from last week and this week, we'll be looking to see if we think we are even close to the criteria that the state has set and we'll be discussing that with the state and back and forth between the county and the health district. At the end of the day, I've got to submit that application to the state and, you know, if we're close, we'll talk about it with the state. If we're not even close or trended the wrong direction, clearly don't meet the criteria, then we'll have a decision to make about whether we submit or not, but we'll do that in consultation with the health district and look at the numbers through this week.

Dr. Spitters, is that pretty?

Chris Spitters: I think that's right on. Yeah. I can't add to that.

Dave Somers: OK, so a question for me. You said business is responding well to the precautions. What have you heard about any problems at any businesses in the county? So I have not received any direct complaints about businesses. We all know about the barber shop in Snohomish a while back. So my opinion really is based on personal observation. As I said, I was out and about yesterday. Two businesses that I went into, small businesses that are opened up under phase two, had social distancing in place, shields, facemasks, limited capacity in a coffee shop that I went into. And so just my observations are people are taking it seriously. It's not perfect. You know, if I had to grade everybody, they really an A for effort, probably a B for execution, but certainly trying. There's room for improvement there. In some of the large retail stores that have been open, I think we've all seen it, I think my estimate is probably 60 to 70% of the people are wearing masks, the other 30 are not. Pretty good social distancing, the stores have put up precautions at check stands and in the waiting line. So again, some good efforts, room for improvement, and, you know, the more we do the safer we'll be. We can't be 100% safe, but the more efforts we take and the more precautions, the more we can sort of limit the transition is my understanding. So my estimation only, no hard data on that. And I don't know, doctor, if you get any complaints about particular businesses or not. They certainly don't come to me. They probably more likely come to the health district.

Chris Spitters: Right. None that have come to my direct attentions. Generally we're referring complainants to the governor's website and then the attorney general's office is following up on those. So that's, you know, I think, I think there was a nursery somewhere in, around or near Snohomish where their patrons had concerns about lack of face mask wearing. And so I know that the AG was following up with that place. That's the only thing I've heard about in the recent days or week or so.

Dave Somers: So next, how have the new case number trends been for the past couple weeks? Also as testing has increased, other areas where they're seeing case spikes have also seen higher percentage of positive tests. Where is our county in that regard?

Chris Spitters: OK, so in the past week or two, you know, we've really been, as I mentioned on previous calls, we've really been averaging about 100 cases a week over the past several weeks. So 75 cases in one day is a bit of a load. Now the question about whether, you know, until we interview all those folks and find out when they first got ill and get their specific date of testing, it's tough to express to you, much less know what time course those cases have occurred over, so we just, we need a few days to work through all those and talk to all those folks. And, you know, we're not going to be able to do an epi analysis on those any faster than we usually would. Our first step is to reach the people, interview them, and get them isolated and get their contacts isolated. So that's the first order of business. And then you will see

updates routinely on our weekly report about epidemiology of cases over the past couple of weeks, which we do, we always report on the full history of the outbreak and then the more recent couple of weeks, so you can, you and we will be looking at that as that comes out toward the end of the week.

Dave Somers: Another question about the application for phase three. Has the county and health district begun preparing an application to move to phase three? I mentioned this earlier, the county and health district met last week to discuss this and agreed to begin preparing the application. The application, obviously, is not ever going to be complete until we have all the data. In fact, that's a huge part of the application process. So we're just in the third week. As Dr. Spitters has mentioned, we have new test results coming in all the time. So, we'll continue to be ready to apply, again looking at the data as it comes in.

Let's see. What about testing and South County? Any plans for that? So far centered in Everett, Snohomish, northern parts of the county.

Chris Spitters: I think our testing planning team is looking at that in the, into the future and you can, I'd have to check our testing calendar, but I know South County is on the radar screen for a site. And, and fortunately, I would submit also that McCollum Park is reasonably accessible from South County, but I think we have specific South County plans in mind going forward. I just can't tell you what they are.

Dave Somers: What is your assessment on mask wearing in the county? I see very few people masking up at grocery stores here. In fact, fewer and fewer every week. What, if anything, are you doing to really push that message?

Again, my assessment, I don't know that we have any data on it is actually I saw an uptick the last week or two. I'm in East County, Sky Valley, so that's where I'm at most of the time. But we have had this discussion between the health district and the county at length, whether it's better, a carrot or stick approach is better on encouraging people to wear masks. As we know, there's a significant part of the population that if they're told to wear a mask absolutely will not do it. And so we've really encouraged people strongly to use common sense and good judgment. And that, I think, still is the mode we are in. We've had some discussions, there's a project that's just started up last week that the governor announced, which is encouraging people to get online and tell their story about why they wear their masks and we can get you the link to that. I didn't think to pull it up this morning. But we're also looking at some public service announcement types to really encourage non politicians or government officials to encourage their fellow residents to wear masks. It's just the best thing for all of us, our public health, but also our businesses and our economy. So I think we'll continue to encourage people strongly through all the methods and means that we can.

Let's see, surely you can tell us whether the party was in the north part of the County, south County. Not telling the public that much leads to increased worry and speculation. Doctor?

Chris Spitters: Well, we don't want to worry people, but I also don't want to, you know, I suppose I could give a general part of the county, but that's just, I don't see that really helping the effort at all. And, you know, if certainly if we found that we were unable to reach the people affected, then we would look at making a public notification, just like we would for let's say hepatitis A at a restaurant, you know. But if we're able to notify all the affected people directly, I just, I think we have to try to honor people's privacy in that way, and I'm sorry if that's

distressing. I would just reassure folks that if you're not hearing from the health district in the next day or two, you weren't exposed

Dave Somers: So there was a question about clarifying on the 75 new cases. Were the 75 new cases all from the last 24 hours? What is the break down by age and city?

Chris Spitters: Yeah, so again, 75 cases reported yesterday. So when they were tested, when they became ill, all that is still, we're still working through that.

Dave Somers: Question for me. I missed last week's Zoom meeting, but would like to hear what type of response you've had to your proposals on policing and social justice reforms from the prosecutor, Sheriff and Council? This can wait.

But actually, let me briefly say that the response has been pretty, pretty positive. Not 100%. But I'd say the Council has been very supportive. As I mentioned, they had a four hour public forum last night via Zoom and I'd say the vast majority of people were supportive of addressing these issues, both in our institutions in our community. The sheriff has given a positive response with some caveats about concerns about the funding for those proposals and we'll work through those as we go forward and sort of refine those proposals and prioritize them. We know some of the things such as body cameras that I recommended do cost money and we've got to address that issue. But by and large the response has been really positive. There's some resistance in the community, some people that don't think there's a problem, I already mentioned that. But that is not going to go away anytime soon. We just have to move forward.

Question about are hospitalizations going up with the increased case count? And what is the county's current rate of infection per hundred thousand residents?

Chris Spitters: OK, so the hospitalizations are stable. They're, we've been in the mid 20s to low 30s, you know, with a little bit of up and down. Currently we're in the high 20s of COVID patients in Snohomish County hospitals. So that's stable. And our last calculated two week rate, I believe, through yesterday was 24 per hundred thousand per 14 day period. That's up from 21 during the, you know, shift back a week and then the prior two weeks was 21, so that's actually our first increase since the top of the curve back at the end of March. So again, just sort of a caution signal to us all, both in terms of how we handle ourselves in public and in gatherings and what we choose to do. And then for the health district and the county as we look at our plans going forward here in the next week or so.

Dave Somers: How many people are doing contact tracing and case investigation today? And are you using the National Guard resources that the state has made available?

Chris Spitters: No, so that, we are not using the National Guard right now. We're using our own staff, dedicated communicable disease control and epidemiology staff, repurposed staff from other disciplines within the health district. Those folks total up about 30 and then we've got Medical Reserve Corps volunteers and additional folks that we're still in the process of hiring with CARES act dollars. And so that's still a growing pool and at the current time, anything that we can't handle in terms of workload, the state health department investigates. So we're, we're able to cover everything that's coming in and we're continuing to grow the ranks for the contact investigations.

Dave Somers: And a follow up question about trends. Pierce County is concerned about a rise in the number of cases, so just wanted to ask, other than the one day with 75, are we not seeing a similar alarming trend, or are we or are we not seeing a similar alarming trend?

Chris Spitters: So, well, I don't know if it's, I think yesterday's number is a little alarming, a little concerning. We definitely need to work through that and then see if that's sustained. Absent yesterday's report, still that figure I just gave of 24 cases per hundred thousand per two weeks was calculated up through last Saturday, so that predates the 75 cases reported yesterday. So, you know, I'm not sure that's a statistically significant bump up from the 21 during the prior two week frame, but it certainly indicates that we're not going down further. And so, not an alarming trend. But, you know, certainly, you know, we were kind of bottoming out over the last three to four weeks, really kind of flat, which is okay. So going up a little bit merits further attention and we'll just have to see where it goes and take it from there.

Dave Somers: Thank you. And I've been reminded that the campaign on social media and elsewhere to have people really video and record and put out their reasons for wearing a mask, if you look at Google, #WearAMaskWA, and I put the the link or the hashtag in the chat box. (<https://restart.us/wearamaskwa/>) You'll be taken to their site. It's a nonprofit organization that's been founded really to use technology and social media to get the message out. And there's some other good projects they're working on there so I really recommend that organization and that movement to you for that. So there you go, restart.us wear a mask campaign. So the website and the organization is restart, and the campaign on social media is WearAMaskWA.

I think that's it.

Joint Information Center: Thank you. This is Kari Bray in the Joint Information Center. Thanks again everyone for joining us today and thank you for your questions. We will go ahead and wrap up now, but please do stay tuned for future availabilities