

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, June 30, 2020, Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: Thank you. Thanks for joining us today. Just wanted to talk for a minute about a difficult aspect of this whole pandemic. It's the disappointment that most or all of us are feeling. Some are feeling helpless. We all want pandemic to be over. We want to get back to our regular lives, get back to our jobs and paychecks and visiting family and friends. And with the Fourth of July coming up, I know those pressures are even harder, but we're in a difficult phase here. The virus easily could be with us for a year or much longer. So we're kind of in the stage where everybody's tired and we want it to be over. But we really need to stay strong. Even though a lot of great people are working on vaccines and treatments, those are proving difficult and could be out in the distance for some time in the distance. So it's really important we help each other, help ourselves, take care of ourselves. We've been through tough times before. We need to help our neighbors and families and friends. And part of that is really just being ourselves, resilient and self-sufficient. So we do know what works against the pandemic and the virus, that's social distancing and wearing masks. So something each of us can do. I was out and about in the East County on Saturday and saw really good compliance with folks wearing masks. Some not, but the most, the vast majority of people wearing masks. So that's just great, because that's going to help us really control this virus and really make sure that we have the capacity in our hospitals to deal with any surges. So that's the key for us. Good job.

It's really sad to see what's happening in Texas and Florida. They opened too soon and now are having to roll restrictions back into place. We do not want to backslide. So wear your mask, socially distance. Keep it up. I know it's hard and everybody's tired, but we have seen a rise in cases. Dr. Spitters will be talking about that in a minute. But the restrictions that are in place really need, we need to double down on them and be careful to make sure that we don't really see a huge spike like some other places are seeing around the country. So wear a mask, be disciplined and keep social distancing.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic, ask for help. There was a really good article in the New York Times earlier this month that laid out the four biggest stresses we're facing and ways to cope with them. You can probably find it online. First stress is parenting overload. I know number of you have kids that you're having to tutor at home and take care of full time and that's extremely difficult. We know that. Ask for help. Second is trauma resurgence. Third is financial and job anxieties. We all know what that's all about. And fourth is relationships stress. Being home much of the time all together has its own pressures on it. So if you're feeling any of these, ask for help and know that almost everyone is feeling the same way. People shouldn't be too hard on themselves. Time will pass. We're going to get through this, be patient and understanding of others. Take a deep breath. Understand it's a very stressful time for everybody and has been since January, so it's been a long slog. But we've done really well in our community and our county, so keep it going. So with that, thank you for being here today and I'm just going to hand over to Dr. Spitters from the Snohomish Health District.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Thank you, executive Somers and good morning everyone. This morning we have officially passed 4,000 cases of COVID-19 reported in Snohomish County. We're currently at 4,012. Obviously, as the day rolls on, it'll continue to click up a bit. For those of you who follow us on social media, you may have seen the updated chart we've posted for the two week case rate data. You may recall, that's a key metric for our own self monitoring of the pandemic, but also it's a key measure that the state uses when evaluating our progress through

the phases. And based on the weekly report that we sent to the Department of Health for June 2 through 16, that's the two week period for the first two weeks of the month, our case rate was 23.6 per 100,000 for that period. Just under that threshold of 25 that we want to be below. But if we look at the next, click forward to the next two week period that we reported on, June 13 to June 27, we're now at 39 cases per 100,000 per two weeks, clearly, up above and we've been on a rise here for a couple weeks. This is clearly far above the target of 25 per hundred thousand. It's also the highest two week rate we've seen since late April, when we were on the descent from that awful peak that we experienced back in mid to late March.

Last week I mentioned we would be closely monitoring the data over the next week or two to see if last weekend's spike of 129 cases from Friday through Monday was a blip or a signal of an emerging problem. Well, I want to update you that for the most recent seven day period, which would be last Tuesday the 23rd through yesterday the 29th, we had 180 cases of COVID reported. That translates into a two week figure of 42 cases per hundred thousand, very similar to the two week figure I just gave you, so clearly we're, we had a nice honeymoon period there the last couple of weeks of May and first week or so of June, where most of the days 10, 15 maybe 20 case reports, but now in the last 10 days we've had four single days of higher case reports than anything we had seen since six weeks ago: 48 yesterday, 39 middle of last week, that big day of 76 last Monday, 36 the Friday before that. So these are, in the current period, unprecedented figures that clearly do signal, obviously increased case rates and a strong belief that that represents increased transmission. It's not just an artifact of counting.

The majority of these cases are linked to either close contacts, that they know someone who had COVID-19, or they don't know anyone who had COVID-19, they don't work in any high risk, setting and the route of acquisition is unknown. And of course, that's the most concerning because that signals that there are cases out there that we were unaware of. Typical venues for close contact again are households, but also social gatherings, parties, places of employment. Households and places of employment, you know, are built in, and kind of by design. And so we really want to try to limit our exposure to things that are optional like social gatherings, parties and the like.

Speaking of parties, since we announced that Stanwood event that had occurred about 10 days ago we have received a growing number of reports of large gatherings being held in Snohomish County. And I just want to urge you that as we head into the Fourth of July weekend, a reminder that the Phase 2 rules still apply. No more than five people outside of your household in a seven day period. So it's fine to get together with people outside your home, but limit it to five people and ideally the same five people over time. So that means a small get together with a family or a few friends is fine to celebrate a holiday, but not a large barbecue, not a festival, not a big party. That's outside the limits of the rules and for good reason. What's happening right now is what we're trying to prevent.

I also do stand by my recommendation from last week that anybody who has recently attended a large gathering remain at home for the next 14 days, and if they develop any symptoms promptly seek testing. As a reminder, quarantine means staying at home for the full 14 day duration of time following a possible exposure. This means not going to work, not visiting with others or having guests over, not running errands, and ideally avoiding close contact with your household members as well. People should not leave their home except for a medical appointment or to get tested under those circumstances.

Not only are large gatherings a higher risk of becoming an event where multiple people get infected, the term we use for that is a super spreader event, but they also present significant challenges to the public health staff in being able to quickly identify and contact those potentially exposed. If there's a case at a family gathering of the household of four plus three or four close family members, so we've got six or eight people to track down. If it's a party of 50 to 70 people, some of whom identities and phone numbers aren't known, that's going to take a huge amount of our energy and our success will be limited in reaching all those people.

So this all impacts these, our performance, our control of the virus and attempts to suppress it as we try to reopen. And it impacts the measurements, the metrics that both we and the state look at when we determine whether we're ready to apply for or be approved for moving ahead to the next phase in the safe start plan. And if things go really poorly, none of us want to slide back, as Executive Somers mentioned, but it's conceivable that if things got really accelerated and hospitals started filling up, that's the kind of thing that might have to occur. So again, I just urge you to, as we're trying to successfully reopen public life, we need to ration our contacts and potential exposures only to what is really essential. I think, again as Executive Somers comments about the forecast for vaccines and therapeutics go along, we're in this for the long haul. This is not going to be over soon. But what is in our control is trying to flatten that new curve that's building up and get things back under control and stay in phase two and then hopefully, you know, recover and in a week or two look at maybe trying to move ahead into phase three, if the situation permits.

So it is in our hands. Staying home is best. If you do get together, smaller is safer than larger, outdoors is safer than indoors. So we're counting on everyone to have a great Fourth and try to, you know, be with the people that you can be with and you can socially connect with but be physically distanced with the rest of the people that are more than those five people around you, and have a safe and healthy Fourth of July.

Now I'd like to turn it over to Pat Morris with the Volunteers of America.

Pat Morris, VOA: Thank you, Dr Spitters. And first, thank you for inviting me to be able to share an exciting launch that we've been doing working in cooperation with Snohomish County Human Services. We have, at Volunteers of America we've been provided some CARES act money to be staging a community COVID outreach counselor team. That team is made up of 10 individuals who are going to be located in various gathering spots in Snohomish County. We're launching that on the 13th of July. I'm very excited about the team that we've been able to recruit.

Their primary purpose is to go out to areas in Snohomish County to be able to reach out to people who might be in a food distribution line or they're at an urgent care center or they're at a medical clinic or a resource center. And our team is going to be approaching individuals and ask if there's any more resources that they may need, to be able to provide them with resources, connect them in with health, check with them to see how emotionally they're doing. As Mr. Somers indicated, this is a really stressful time for all of us. And for some more stressful than others. And we want to make sure that we're proactively reaching out to community members to be able to make sure that their needs are going to be met. COVID-19 resources, if there's any silver lining in this pandemic, it is that the federal and county support that we're getting as a nonprofit at Volunteers of America. We've received some very generous funding opportunities to be able to stage up this team. We also, I also oversee the North Sound 211 information and

referral line and our calls have tripled since COVID-19, not surprisingly, and we've been able to get additional funding to staff and increase our staffing, to be able to hopefully handle the volume of calls that are coming into 211. And that's for a five county region but 75% of our calls in 211 come from Snohomish County.

So our CCOC is going to be launched and what we're doing right now strategically is we want to be proactive. One of the reasons for that proactive approach is we know that there are a lot of individuals who are coming into food banks, coming into distribution and food pantries. What we're hearing consistently is I never thought I would ever be in this situation. So this is a relatively new population of individuals seeking out social services because of COVID-19. And social services, it's a difficult system to navigate and there are resources available for individuals, everything from rental assistance to utility assistance, a variety of different housing vouchers. But a lot of the individuals who have never been accustomed to navigating the social service system, they don't even know where to start. So our CCOCs are going to be staged at these logical gathering places to be able to reach out to individuals because the likelihood of them calling in or knowing to call in to 211 is probably pretty slim and we want to make sure that we're filling those gaps and informing people that may be going without essential needs through our CCOC team.

We will be doing that a real time. All of our team will be connected into the north south 211 database which is being updated on a daily basis, trying to keep ahead of all the new resources that are coming in through COVID-19 working with our other community partners. And if somebody is experiencing emotional, behavioral distress to the level that they're needing to talk to somebody, get into some counseling, or if they're having thoughts of suicide, we can do a direct connect into our Volunteers of America crisis line. Our crisis line is fielding calls from individuals who are having a lot of emotional distress because of COVID. Our call rates are now starting to climb. It took a couple months before our call volumes, we were starting to see an uptick, and now our call volumes have doubled on a day to day basis, predominantly because people are just getting more and more concerned and their life situation is being more and more stressed by COVID. So we have the ability to connect them to mental health professionals in real time and that is a 24-7 service. Our CCOC team is going to be reaching out to the community, Monday through Friday from nine to five. But if anybody is needing to talk to an outreach counselor, they can reach us through 211, and 211 also is a nine to five service, but they have a warm transfer option after hours connect and talk to a live person in our care crisis line.

So we're excited about, excited about the opportunity. We think it's just another means that Snohomish County individuals can get the help that they need and can get connected with resources. So thank you for letting me describe the program.

Dave Somers: Thank you, Pat, and thanks for all the great work Volunteers of America is doing. It's been amazing. Thank you.

Pat Morris, VOA: Thank you.

Dave Somers: So first question is, any plans to close parks or other public places for mass, where mass gatherings are possible for the holiday weekend? We have not made any decision to close parks yet. We'll review that again tomorrow, look at the numbers, talk to the health district. But at this time our parks will be open under normal phase two rules.

Second question, for Dr. Spitters I believe. I'm hearing that from young people who say most of the testing positive now are younger people who feel they don't have anything to worry about and therefore don't want to wear masks and want to go about their usual summer fun, and deaths are down. What's your message to people in that regard, Dr. Spitters?

Chris Spitters: Unmuted. Thank you. Well, first, one, deaths are down from their peak, but we're still seeing 1 to 3 people die every day in Snohomish County from COVID, so that's and that's been the case for about a month. That's stable, but with this recent surge in cases, if that's going to lead to some hospitalizations and deaths, we would see that in a week to two weeks. So we just have to wait and see there. While younger people are testing positive more frequently than they did earlier in the epidemic, still it's abroad age distribution of people who are infected and are being reported. So in the prior two weeks, about 15% of the cases were over 70, and 15% you know 60 to 70, another 15% 40 to 50 to 60, and so each decade is being affected. It's just that early in the epidemic, you know, where we have, you know, we might have only 5% of cases in people under 30, now it's about 30%, so there is more. Some of that's more testing among younger people that wasn't occurring earlier in the course. But it might also have some other ingredients like since Phase two liberalized our public life a little bit, younger people may be working in customer facing activity there, younger people more likely to work in retail and possibly have exposures there, highlighting the importance of face coverings in commercial and retail establishments. And then as well as young adults and teenagers having impromptu get togethers that exceed recommended size. So we certainly urge them to think twice about that and, you know, join us all. You know, young people don't get sick as often. But young people still can be hospitalized. So it may not seem as scary to a young person to catch COVID, but if somebody that, if you're one of the rare ones that really does get sick or you happen to pass it along to a friend, relative or someone you don't even know who is more vulnerable, you know, that'd be great and preventable tragedy.

Dave Somers: And I would just add to that, if you're around young people that are feeling that way, just try to impress on them that wearing a mask isn't just about your own health. It's about protecting those around you. And our businesses are suffering. I mean, we are all caught in the grips of this thing. And if we don't take it seriously, each and every one of us, we're hurting everybody else around us, and our businesses, our economy, our lives. So we just need to keep sending that message. Wearing a mask is not about protecting yourself, it's about protecting all of us, so please stress that message.

So there's a question, how realistic a possibility is a return to phase one. I actually would like to start with this. A week or so ago, I would have thought it was a remote possibility. I don't feel that way anymore. I think going back to Phase one is clearly one of the options that could be in front of us, watching what happens around the country with places that have opened up too soon, and they're seeing huge spikes. If we see that sort of thing here, and we're really stressing our hospital capacity, I can see the possibility of a call to go back to Phase one. That would be extremely difficult to do. But if we don't get this, our numbers down and we don't keep that capacity, our hospitals, opened up, it's clearly a possibility. Dr. Spitters, that's my opinion. How about you?

Chris Spitters: Agreed. Agreed. And the, you know, the time will tell. The data will tell us. We at the health district, we're certainly doing our best, but we need, you know, everyone to try to help us flatten that curve. If we can't do it and it starts running away like it did back in March, then we will have no choice. But certainly all of us want to avoid that. So let's do everything we can.

Dave Somers: For Dr. Spitters, has anybody tested positive because of the Stanwood party. If so, how many people and how we doing on contact tracing for the Stanwood party?

Chris Spitters: So first, I'm not aware of any new positives that have arisen from that. Sometimes that takes a few days, but we just put that signal out for people to be aware of and go get tested, so we probably wouldn't have a clear answer yay or nay on that till the end of the week. As far as the contact investigation, because the hosts of the event were not able to identify a significant proportion of the people who attended, we're left with nothing more to do really than what we've been doing which is making sure it gets out through media channels that this event did occur and there was a case. And if you attended, you should quarantine and think about getting tested. And that's where we're at. So that's our contact investigation for that event now is just reiterating that message.

Dave Somers: Good. Next question. Last week's statewide situation report indicated testing has not increased greatly in the county as case counts rise. Does that mean the rate of infection or the R-naught is now higher in the county than surrounding counties? And officials in Los Angeles County on Monday estimated one in 10 people are likely infected, whether they know it or not. Do you think it is much higher or lower in Snohomish County? Is undercounting likely? A couple of questions there, Dr. Spitters, for you.

Chris Spitters: So let's take those one at a time. First, the, we're still running about 2,500 tests a week. I don't have an exact count from last week, but it's been pretty steady over the last month. And we've seen more positives, I think because there's more transmission occurring. And so the rate, the positivity rate is going up. And sort of true and true and unrelated. The other truth is that cases are going up. So by definition, that reproductive rate of the infection must be greater than one, or we wouldn't see infections going up. So both of those are true. 10% of the population likely infected, whether they know it or not? Recent sero surveys, I haven't seen the final approved, you know, reviewed document, but some drafts suggested that, for instance, the University of Washington Medical Center, I think patients seeking care for other reasons had like a 3 to 5% positivity rate, the healthcare workers at University of Washington 3% sero positive, meaning antibodies, that's not active cases. So I'm not sure what they're referring to in LA. At any one time though, it's maybe one in 10,000 have active, you know, are actively ill with COVID. And the estimated cumulative prevalence of infection is probably somewhere in the single digits, 3 to 5% of the population. So still, given all we've been through, only a small minority of us have already been infected and the vast majority remain susceptible as fuel for that transmission to occur in we're unable to put a lid on things.

Dave Somers: There's a question regarding the impact of the virus on homelessness and services in the county in more detail. And Pat, would you like to speak to that. I will say, I know that our food banks and a lot of people are having economic difficulties and there's been some great programs to provide food through the food banks and other things. But any further detail, you'd like to talk about that?

Pat Morris, VOA: Sure. Well, we are seeing that there's an increase in people that are having housing insecurity. It might not get to the point of being homeless at this point. I think our biggest concern because we do a homeless prevention program as well and we're going to be having, through the CARES acts, some very generous rental vouchers and rental subsidies that will be available and our CCOC team can connect them to those entities. At VOA our biggest concern is when the eviction moratorium is lifted, that we have individuals who very well may be

faced with being asked by the landlord to have two or three months of rent payable after that moratorium. So we're really anticipating that we're going to see a surge in that, in that people have not been able to get back to work because of the slow progression. And we're concerned that people are going to have, and there'll be an increase in a new population facing eviction and having housing insecurity. Our rental assistance that's going to be deployed as well through Volunteers of America will hopefully help that. But it's certainly not going to be enough to stem the increase in homelessness.

Dave Somers: Thank you. Dr. Spitters, you said no one tested positive at the party, but last week, you said one person who attended did test positive. Can you clarify?

Chris Spitters: Correct. The one person tested positive, that led to the notification, we're not aware of any additional positives at this time resulting from that exposure.

Dave Somers: And we have a question. If we hear about another big party will we consider sending the sheriff's office to break it up? I've there are high school kids mainly who chattered on social media about having another one this past weekend. Sorry, another big party.

Yes. If we hear about it, we will notify the sheriff's office. As you know, you may have heard in this county the sheriff is independently elected and so would have to make that decision whether he was going to send his officers. We can certainly ask and recommend and hope they would respond, but if we hear about anything, we will certainly pass that information on. Dr. Spitters, I don't know how you guys handle those sorts of situations.

Chris Spitters: Well, you know, although we are, we're not really a law enforcement agency. We certainly enforce the codes around Environmental Health, Food Service, sewage and septic tanks and with specific communicable disease events, you know, individuals who pose an imminent threat to public health. We take action on those. This sort of thing, you know, I suppose we'd have the same response that you mentioned. But I would want to urge, you know, that for all of us to kind of try to avoid the need to go to law enforcement and, you know, parents, property owners, you know, keep in mind if a party, an unauthorized party occurs on your property and someone has a bad outcome as a result of that related to COVID, that's a big liability. I don't know whether anyone would ever take action on such a thing. But that's one interest, you know, so try to keep these young kids who are interested in getting together for understandable reasons but probably need some coaching or some direct supervision to quash those attempts.

Dave Somers: I just wanted actually to follow up on one item just extremely briefly is there's the mistaken impression that our numbers are up because our testing is up and that is not the case in Snohomish County and most places. You know, testing has continued, but it's not increased at the same rate that the positive case counts have so that is completely untrue, incorrect, and misleading. And it's really unfortunate because people think that's the reason that the numbers are going up is because of testing. It's not. So just want to be extremely clear about that.

I think that wraps us up.

Joint Information Center: Thank you all. This is Kari Bray in the Joint Information Center. We appreciate you joining us for the briefing today and all of your questions. I'm going to go ahead and wrap this up, but please do stay tuned for future availabilities. Thanks.