

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, July 21, 2020, Briefing

Dave Somers: Good morning, everybody. Thanks for joining us today. And I'm actually not going to talk about COVID today. I've got a bit of good news to talk about and it's really a project we're all very excited about. But for the last couple of years we've been working with the town of Darrington and the nonprofit organization Forterra on a project that we think is going to really transform East County and the Darrington area. So the town of Darrington will be developing the Darrington Wood Innovation Center. And this is going to be a campus that will house and hopefully attract new wood fiber based innovation and manufacturing companies. The center will include companies building or manufacturing mass timber, cross laminated timber (CLT), and modular housing. CLT is especially exciting. It was recently added to the universal building codes used in many parts of the world, but it utilizes wood that normally would not be used or usable. And so it's really taking advantage of product and material that we have an abundance of in our county and in our region and putting it to use building buildings, modular buildings, so very excited about it. It's been a much sought after project and we're just very happy Darrington was able to land that and pull it together. So as you know, many of our rural areas never really recovered from the days of natural resource dependent logging and mining, and local jobs are hard to find. And so this is just a piece of really good news for them.

We know we have to be innovative and collaborative. So as I mentioned, we have been working on this for a number of years. Our partnership with Darrington, Forterra and the state of Washington really is going to transform how towns utilize natural resources to create sustainable jobs for the future. So Darrington officials identified the site for the wood innovation center northwest of town. Darrington will be installing the required utilities, doing environmental work and road infrastructure to the site. And Forterra then will help develop the site and manage the construction of the innovation center buildings that they will in turn be leased to manufacturing companies. So on Thursday, the town received a \$2 million award from the state of Washington community economic revitalization board or CERB, and so that was really a critical piece of the funding to support site acquisition and the infrastructure work. So the town of Darrington and Forterra also were awarded a series of grants to support due diligence and conceptual planning for the project, including funds from the governor's strategic reserve fund. So again, this has been a project that's been in the works for a number of years and pieces have been being put in place over those years, and Thursday was a big day receiving that \$2 million grant. So the town will be finalizing funding for the infrastructure work and groundbreaking is expected in 2021. So I really want to thank Darrington Mayor Dan Rankin for his leadership in this project and steadfast support. Also on our team Linda Neunzig has been a relentless advocate and done a lot of a great work for that in partnership with the town, the mayor and Forterra. And just congratulations to everybody and it's nice to have a piece of good news these days. And so we're very excited about it for Darrington and for our county and we're just going to keep working to find innovative ways to build our future here in Snohomish County, a bright future for everybody.

So with that, wear a mask, wash your hands, socially distance. And I'll turn it over to Dr. Spitters from the Snohomish Health District.

Chris Spitters: Thank you, Executive Somers and good morning everyone. Well, today, July 21 marks the 180th approximately day, the six month mark since our first case of COVID-19 was reported as Snohomish County back on January 21 and during that time we've had approximately the same number of deaths. So over, over time, roughly one per day. That was

more back in March and April and fewer deaths now, but still each and every one of those are something that is on the mind to the health district staff and the rest of the community as we push forward and try to deal with this crisis. And so the loved ones of those that we've lost and others who have suffered are perpetually on our mind as we go through and try to keep this thing under control while we work toward getting to the other end of it.

And in that process, greatly appreciative of the support of Executive Somers, our Board of Health, the county department of emergency management, county human services, Emergency Medical Services, the entire healthcare system, schools, just to name a few. It's really been an all government, all society effort and we're really grateful for the support and collaboration of those partners and many others whom I have failed to mention specifically.

So with that, I'd like to just move into a brief update on the numbers. As you're aware from our daily reports and last Friday's report, the numbers of cases reported daily continues the sustained increase. The rolling two-week average now is up to 81 cases per hundred thousand per two week period, roughly four times that about six weeks ago when we were at our best down around 20 cases per hundred thousand per two week period. And that's been a sustained increase now for five weeks. Deaths and hospitalizations are not yet increasing. We've discussed that before. We believe that's due to the relative concentration of the cases in younger age groups who, while not free of serious, occasional serious effects of the disease, do not end up in the hospital or facing serious illness or death with the same frequency that older or medically vulnerable individuals do.

So with that, I, I'd like to move on to one topic. That's, as the case numbers increase, even though our testing efforts have increased over time, the demand is high. And we're also competing with specimens from other parts of the country through commercial regional labs that service most of our health care system. And so when a specimen's collected in Snohomish County and goes to one of the regional commercial labs, it's often competing with specimens from areas where lots of cases are occurring and many more specimens are rolling in. So turnaround times, that is the time from collection until results, have gone from just a couple of days out to seven days even 10 days in some cases. So for those of you out there who are awaiting test results, I want to remind you, seeking testing if you are ill, if you have symptoms of COVID, we want you to stay home until the results are either negative and then if they're negative we want you to still stay home for 72 hours after your symptoms resolve. Even though it's not COVID, that's another virus that we'd like you to keep to yourself and not spread. If the results are positive, then of course you need to stay in isolation at home. And it's generally 10 days after your illness has occurred and three days after you've been without fever or, and other symptoms are improving. If you are symptomatic and your test results are negative, but you're not getting better, before going back to work or interacting with others, contact your healthcare provider, ask about the possibility of being retested or figuring out what else might be going on that explains your illness. And then last but not least, asymptomatic people, no symptoms of COVID but who have been recently exposed or part of an outbreak at work or at home or in some other setting, even if your results are negative and you're without symptoms, you must remain at home for the full 14 day period after your last exposure, even if your test results are negative. And all of this, what I'm telling you, becomes ever more important now that results are going to be up to seven to 10 days out for a while until our lab system is able to catch up with the capacity issues.

Turning back to another issue I alluded to earlier about the relative concentration of cases in younger age groups. On Friday afternoon of last week, our press release shared some insights about the recent increase in cases. One of these is the growing number of cases in younger ages compared to earlier in the epidemic. Of the 547 new cases reported to the health district from June 28 to July 11, over 50% were individuals under the age of 30. The highest percentage in a 10 year, a decade age group was in folks in their 20s, 20 to 29 year olds, representing 164 or 30% of the cases in that two week period. The next highest decade of age were those 30 to 39 years of age at 18%, 97 cases over those two weeks.

Now there are likely a variety of reasons for this shift from the older age groups earlier in the epidemic now to younger groups. Many of them are positive. One is the notion that older residents significantly impacted earlier in the year have heeded public health warnings to stay close to home, except for essential errands. I know the elder and medically vulnerable folks in, you know, my neighborhood and life are still trying to do that. Additional rules restricting visitors from assisted living, long term care and similar facilities have also been successful at keeping infected people out of those settings and decreasing rates in older adults. Now that early focus on older folks may have led many younger adults and teenagers to believe that COVID-19 is not a risk of them. Another concern is looking at the types of employment these younger age ranges have with jobs that are more likely to be in retail, food service, hospitality, customer facing employment that increases the number of people they come in contact with on a daily basis. So we suspect it's a bit of employment related but also gathering related fuel for the fire of COVID that's occurring in the younger age groups right now.

And based on information gathered from case investigations during recent contact investigations, a substantial proportion of recent cases are indeed associated with gatherings that are larger than the permitted number. Preliminary data from June 20 to July 11 showed at least 82 cases associated with at least 36 social gatherings larger than the allowed number. The number of cases associated with a single gathering range from one to nine, with an average of five cases associated with a single event. The number of attendees ranged from four to 40, with an average of 13 people, far over the permitted number of five. The largest single day of gatherings was July 4, as you might expect, with 30 separate social events linked to confirmed cases.

So even though Snohomish County remains and phase two and social gatherings are limited to no more than five people outside the household, this data suggests that many people are making choices to exceed that number in their social activities. While it may seem as though a few extra people is no big deal, these findings show that it is in fact a big deal. There is very little margin for error with this virus and the health district is encouraging people to keep their social groups as small as possible and no greater than five people outside the home in a week. Ideally, people should maintain the same group of five across time. Less people, less risk. More people, more risk. When you keep your social circle small and stable and wear a face covering when in public, you are protecting not only the elderly and the chronically ill, but you're also protecting the healthcare providers who take care of all of us, and all the other essential workers who are sustaining us through this crisis. You may never see the life you save, it may be one or two infections down the line away from you. Conversely, doing the opposite, indulging in excessively large gatherings, which doesn't mean huge just, you know, more than five, not wearing face coverings in public, those increase exposure of these types of individuals, the elderly, essential workers, healthcare workers, and these folks don't have a choice in the matter.

And this slows down the progress we can make in reopening the economy and public life, and quite importantly in resuming children's education.

To quote the most recent report from the Institute of Disease Modeling and the Washington State Department of Health: Hospitalization rates, although not yet increasing in Snohomish County, are starting to increase in western Washington and continue to grow across all age groups in Eastern Washington. As transmission moves from younger adults into older more vulnerable populations, which is beginning to occur, we expect new hospitalizations and eventually deaths to trend up across the state. Washington State is in the early stages of an exponential statewide outbreak that has zero chance of being reversed without changes in our collective behavior. So I urge all of us, regardless of our age or health status, to think of the community at large and follow recommendations for limiting social contacts and gatherings, wearing face coverings in public, and maintaining six feet of distance between ourselves and others. These and the other personal hygiene and COVID prevention messages we've been sending out are effective interventions that are fully within our individual control and duties as members of the community.

So, thank you. And now I'll turn it back over to Executive Somers for questions.

Dave Somers: Thank you. Most of these are for you, doctor. But have we done any kind of polling similar to Yakima County to determine the percentage of people in the county wearing masks? And follow up question, do you have any additional recommendations or warnings for people on wearing masks while it's hot?

Chris Spitters: Yeah. Well in the works is the first answer. We haven't done anything like that but we're working on putting something together like that. It might just be a simple count of yes or no. But that is something we ought to be able to get done within the next week or two.

Yes, of course, as the temperature goes up wearing a mask for many people will be more uncomfortable than when the weather's mild. If you're finding that uncomfortable, you can go outside, get more than six feet away from people, and take a mask break. Take it off. Breathe. Wipe off your face if you're sweating and try to get comfortable again and then put it back on and resume the activity that you were doing that led you to need the mask, whatever that is. But we can't, we've got to stick with the regime. We've got to use the masks. And so I think mask breaks are probably the best way to mitigate any discomfort associated with the current weather.

Dave Somers: Next question is, what is the recommendation for onsite learning for schools?

Chris Spitters: Well, that's a, that is a policy decision that's really in the hands of the schools, certainly with the guidance and input from the State Department of Health. And then once the policy is established, the local health departments are more in the position of helping the schools implement that guidance and answering questions, investigating any cases or outbreaks that might occur in a school. So that policy development at the state level is underway.

Dave Somers: So with increasing new case load, are we looking at having to go backwards and impose more restrictions? That was suggested by myself a couple weeks ago. If not, why not? And I will just say that I know that governor's office had a session yesterday with county and city officials, presented much of the data that Dr. Spitters talked about. So the cases, both

in western Washington and eastern Washington are increasing, very concerning. Now Spokane County is actually the hotbed, Yakima County has managed to turn it around. So I will be in discussions with the state and other counties and cities throughout this week to determine what a course of action is. And Dr. Spitters, do you want to follow up on that?

Chris Spitters: Well, I think you've covered it precisely. And the cases are, as you've mentioned before, executive Somers, we have mixed signals. On the one hand cases are up and we're seeing, you know, gatherings and although we don't have a quantitation, I think face covering usage is less than ideal. On the other hand, at the current moment hospitalizations and deaths are stable over the past six weeks. I'm not confident that under the current situation that's going to be sustained. I'm not going to make predictions about, you know, where things are going. It's just, it's hard to know. But certainly it's in all of our hands to try to guard against having to slide back. Everything we can do, those items I mentioned in our hands, that are in our hands, we have some control, not complete, but we have a good amount of control over trying to prevent that.

Dave Somers: And just add on to that, that the, what's concerning to me is that the bulk of the new cases do seem to be coming in, originate in social gatherings, which are already not allowed, and how you control those, how you get through to the younger folks who have less concern is a difficult, difficult problem. So, as we're talking with the state we'll be emphasizing that we need to get to the root of the problem somehow rather than take actions that don't, won't really help us. But as Dr. Spitters mentioned, gatherings of over five people are already not allowed under phase two and they're happening regardless, so that's an evolving issue that we all have to deal with.

Um, how is the seven to 10 day lag in testing impacting your contact tracing efforts? And are you seeing any outbreaks in long term care facilities?

Chris Spitters: Well, as you can imagine, a delay of seven to 10 days in getting a result, you know, just to run the ideal timeline would be if I had, if I developed symptoms today, ideally I get tested today or tomorrow and have results tomorrow or the next day thereafter. I remain isolated if my results are positive and I'd hear from the health district around day two or three of my illness. They, if I hadn't already notified my contacts, they would be on it, and by day three or four of my illness we sort of got a public health intervention set up and rolling now. Without individual action and seven to 10 day lags in testing, you're looking at us reaching individuals who are positive really approaching the time when they're at the end of their contagious period and their contacts are about halfway through the incubation period. So just by definition, we're losing some yardage on our game plan there. It hasn't really hit us yet because this backlog of testing is relatively new and like other things with respect to COVID, there's often a one or two week delay between current events and what we see on our radar screen. But certainly, it's a challenge to it and it will, in the long run, erode the effectiveness of our disease intervention efforts. That's why the Health District is also trying to stand up more testing. We don't have much control over the ingredients that are affecting the national log jam. But there you have it.

Dave Somers: Again for Dr. Spitters, have you seen the new spike in cases in any particular cities or part of the county. You previously said Everett and Marysville. Is that still the case, and if so, any idea why?

Chris Spitters: Well, again, currently the case reports roughly mirror the population of the county. It's really, the cases are spread roughly in the distribution of the population of the county, we're not seeing any focal concentration in any area.

And I just wanted to add on, if I may just to rewind, long term care facilities, just a few cases. No, no, I think there might be one long term care facility that's had a couple of cases in the past week or two, but nothing like we saw before. Nevertheless, that is a vulnerable spot for us that if it finds its way into long term care we're going to end up back where we were in March.

Dave Somers: And I think you've already addressed this. With the majority of new cases being with young people, are you concerned that those cases could creep into older age groups and jumpstart hospitalizations?

Chris Spitters: Right. And that's already being seen in the in the rest of the, rest of the country. There's been some work done looking at the Florida cases. Florida started in folks in their 20s and 30s and it spread upward and downward in age group and we're starting to see statewide a similar movement out of the, you know, 20 to 40 age group, both up and down the age chain. So sadly, without significant changes in our behavior, I think that's what lies ahead.

Dave Somers: So last question we have is if people are ignoring rules against large gatherings will the county consider doing what other states are doing and breaking up parties? Well, I'll just start on that, let Dr. Spitters jump in, but I think what's concerning to me is these gatherings seem to be more social gatherings, you know, private residences and parties and that sort of thing. We really don't have the ability to respond to calls and break those things up. We'll be talking to the state on how best to approach this. But as with mask wearing and social distancing, ultimately we really need our residents to self-enforce and figure out how to discourage these things and not have them in the first place. And I think unless we know about these things in advance, which many times we don't, it's extremely difficult. So again, our residents really need to take this seriously and I'll be talking to the governor about how we message to younger folks about this and really try to drive home and target that message to get them to take it seriously. Doctor Spitters, want to add?

Chris Spitters: I agree completely that these are, the bulk of the cases are arising from small, relatively small gatherings that are still too large. And even if we had perfect knowledge, think about that July 4, 30 gatherings. I mean, that's, that would be several law enforcement folks just tied up doing that. So I don't work in law enforcement, but I think that there's a, there is just a capacity problem there and, you know, frankly I think there's, you know, we have a moral issue at hand that we owe it to the community and our neighbors to really do this voluntarily to think of the wellbeing of others, the person two infections down the road.

Now I will say, when we hear about a large gathering, although those certainly get more attention and they're probably not contributing as many cases because they are fewer in number, when we do hear about those we generally ask the law enforcement of jurisdiction there to make an educational visit or contact with the convener of the proposed event. You know, sometimes we get tips. And then we'll follow up with them as well to ask them to not have the event and answer any questions. So we're doing the best we can but we're really, you know, we really need to be all hands on deck and think of the whole community when you're making decisions about how to spend your time and who to get together with

Dave Somers: That looks like it.

Joint Information Center: Thank you everyone. This is Kari Bray in the Joint Information Center. We really appreciate you joining us today and for your questions. Please do stay tuned for future media availabilities and thank you again.