

## **TRANSCRIPT: Nourishing Neighborhoods in Snohomish County, Aug. 21, 2020, Briefing**

**Jason Biermann:** This is Jason Biermann, the Emergency Management Director for Snohomish County. Thanks for joining us. I just want to use my remarks to give a little bit of the background and how we got to the point where we implemented Nourishing Neighborhoods, and then I'll turn it over to Linda and Vince and they'll fill in a lot of the details, excuse me. So just in terms of an overview, we're working here at the Emergency Coordination Center in Snohomish County, and this is the place where we coordinate the county's response not just to COVID-19 but to any large disaster that strikes the county. And I think that's some important context because while this program has been put in place for COVID-19, certainly food security and access to food will be an issue obviously for COVID but also for other incidents like an earthquake, but even snowstorms and other things we've seen. If folks recall earlier this year we were actually helping organize and working with folks who were bringing food out to the eastern end of U.S. 2. So the idea of food security and being able to provide food to our residents in the county, while it's really important right now because of what's happening with COVID-19, it's also something that's applicable to really a large number of the disasters and hazards that we face here in the county.

One of the things that I think makes this county unique, among the many great things, we do have a large earthquake risk and we have a lot of hazards that we face. And one of the things that leads us, you know, sort of further down the path to where we get to Nourishing Neighborhoods is one of the things we started working on a number of years ago after an earthquake exercise was identifying that our county is really made up of population islands. And those population islands, at least when we started talking about this, were created by earthquake damage. So we've done a lot of modeling using some tools that are available from FEMA, some that we've developed ourselves, and we looked at how damage might affect our county and how these population islands would start to come to be after a large disaster. But again, there's regular applicability, there's local applicability. A snowstorm that isolates part of the community creates a population island. So Nourishing Neighborhoods really became a way to get food, locally sourced food, more close to where some of these population islands are. So that's really some of the background and how we got to where asking Linda and folks like Vince to help us with this. That's just some of the background.

You know, I want to make one last pitch before I go. You know, underlying all of this is the fact that we are in an area that experiences disasters so personal preparedness is certainly part of this. And Linda and Vince will talk about community resilience and how we work together as a community but just one last pitch for everyone is just a reminder that, you know, we've been encouraging folks for several years to be prepared for up to 14 days and certainly food is part of that preparedness. So with that I'm just going to turn it over to these folks and Linda is going to speak next about Nourishing Neighborhoods and how that's helped us address some of these food security issues during COVID-19 and how I think it will also help us for other disasters in the future.

**Linda Neunzig:** Thank you Jason. Good morning everyone. Early on in the COVID-19 outbreak I was getting phone calls from our farmers. They wanted to know what to do. It's early in the season. Time to get crops in the ground but they don't want to put crops in the ground if they don't know if there's someone to buy it on the end. We were seeing restaurants close their doors not knowing if or when they were going to open. Farmers have three main channels that they're selling their produce to. They go to Farmers Markets which we didn't know if they were

going to be able to open. If they did open, what's it going to be? Community supported agriculture boxes where you buy a share in the farm and you get your box every week for 20 weeks. And then there was the restaurant industry. So the questions was, how do I plant? How do I plant for the year? Do I buy seeds? Do I spend the money and put in a lot of product, my normal product? They're putting out a lot of money because they're putting in drip irrigation systems, they're putting down weed control fabric, they're hiring employees to do the weeding and do a lot of the work. So it's not just put it in the ground and maybe it'll work maybe it won't. There's a lot that goes behind it.

So we also know there is vulnerable communities that are identified through the Social Vulnerability Index along with through HUD and some other indices that go into identifying that Emergency Management does. So how do we connect these two? Because really our food security is right here in the valley. It's right here in Snohomish County. When the distribution channels slow down or cease to exist for a short period of time, when we go to the grocery store and there's no food or limited amounts of food on the grocery stores aisles, we know that our agricultural community is our food security. So how do we match these things up? And that's where Nourishing Neighborhoods came into play. If we can take the amazing produce, the fruits and vegetables that our farmers are growing right here in our backyard and get that directly to the people most at need, that was really important. It's important to this day. These folks don't have easy access to a grocery store, at least within a half mile walking distance for them. They don't have easy access to a food bank. And also, can we augment from the food bank? If they're getting wonderful shelf-stable items but maybe not access to fresh fruits and vegetables, can we augment what they're already getting to help balance that meal out.

The impact that it's having all the way around, even in its early stages, has been incredible. Vince, you can talk about how you bring all the farmers together to put this together to be able to get the product out there, but then on the receiving side it's just been incredible. The gratefulness that people have for getting the product. There's, just the other day I had a woman say to me thank you so much for bringing this. I have health issue, I can't get fresh local stuff like this, and I need this product but I can't get it. And she was so incredibly grateful to have fresh fruits and vegetables just for her health alone. But that's just one of the impacts that we're making. And we hear these stories everywhere we go. The people who are saying thank you, we appreciate this, God bless you for doing this. And then to see the impact it's having on our agricultural community. And then it goes even further with the company that we're using to do some of our distribution. They were immediately able to bring back a driver to do distribution that has been laid off. They brought back a warehouse person that had been laid off. And then the company that we use to help put the boxes together, they brought back an employee that had been laid off out of their warehouse. So when we look at how the impact just keeps growing and growing and growing. We're still in our infancy and there's so many opportunities out there yet to go.

So I'll turn it over to you, Vince, to talk about the farming side of it.

**Vince Caruso:** Thank you Linda. When Linda came to mention the idea of doing this project, I think it was in April maybe May, I was really excited about the idea to have county money spent on local farms and vegetables because most of the farms that I'm working with to assemble boxes to provide for the Nourishing Neighbor program come from farms that are family, what you think of when you think of a family farm, kind of under 10 acres. And most all of those families are going to be spending all of that money they they've received back into the county

kind I would say we're not poster child but pretty close in that when we get money we are all local businesses and we understand the importance of spending that money locally. So it's been really nice to know that we're receiving county money and it's staying in the county for ag products.

Typically, when we're a small family farm we have to capture every dollar we can so we're selling at the farmers markets and direct to consumer and our products never really make it to all of our community, and this program has been great because we're able to see our product go to all different demographics. I meet Linda at the drop sites where we're dropping these boxes off and the people that show up to receive their boxes are so thankful and grateful and I think that, you know, it's really nice when you're leaving there and we're pulling the truck away empty and everybody's still giving us thanks and messages of appreciation, so it's been great. So thank you.

**Jason Biermann:** Thank you Vince. And just as a reminder if there are any questions, yes, please put them in the chat. So Linda, there's a question in the chat asking how many people have we served with this program? Please unmute yourself Linda.

**Linda Neunzig:** Thank you. We're going to different apartment complexes at different rates. Some we go to every two weeks, we've got one we go to monthly. So we've delivered I believe about 2,700 boxes.

**Jason Biermann:** And Linda, I think this question is also for you. How many farms do we have taking part in this program?

**Linda Neunzig:** I believe we have Vince and then four other farms he's getting products from the make the boxes full. Is that correct, Vince? Oh, we're up to six now. Awesome.

**Jason Biermann:** And there's one more question that I think I can handle asking about if any of this food goes to the food banks. And I believe right now the Nourishing Neighborhoods program utilizes the food directly from the farmers. I don't believe any of it's going to the food banks. Is that correct, Linda?

**Linda Neunzig:** When we have extra boxes that are not utilized, which we don't have very many, those boxes have in the past gone to the food bank. We try to really drill it down to where we're getting the right number of boxes for each complex. Some of them even have sign-up sheets where the residents sign up that particular week for a box so that we can bring the exact number of boxes that we need.

**Jason Biermann:** And last question if there's any distribution happening today?

**Linda Neunzig:** Not today, nope. We had one yesterday.

**Jason Biermann:** Yeah, and I think we're mainly working on distribution on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

**Linda Neunzig:** Correct.

**Jason Biermann:** So this question is about funding and how long the program will last, so I will take this one. Initially we programmed \$150,000 in the request that we made. And I do want to message with the support of the executive and council the funding for this is coming from the CARES appropriation, the CARES Act funding that was appropriated to Snohomish County, so

there was an initial request for \$150,000 to support this program. We have been talking about with council and with the folks like Linda who are actually putting this program, implementing it on the ground, what it would take to expand and sustain this. Right now the funding we have as part of the CARES Act appropriation has to be expended by the end of this calendar year. So looking at what the need is ongoing beyond that is still something we're discussing and of course there are other implications such as if there is going to be another CARES package approved by Congress and what that's going to look like. But right now that's what the funding looks like locally and that's how long we project the program will last.

Yeah, this is great question. Linda I'll let you start with this and if I have anything to add I sure will. How are the distribution locations, it says target, how are the distribution targets, I think they mean locations, chosen and is there a consideration to distribute equitably across the county and across demographic groups. That's a great question and I know Linda's got a great answer.

**Linda Neunzig:** We already distribute throughout the county. So they're using multiple different factors that go into choosing where we can have the largest impact. So we're everywhere from Monroe to Bothell to Everett to Snohomish. We really are trying to make sure we're having the highest impact with what we have available. So finding those places within the county is the number one goal because we know who they are, or what apartment complexes they are. We need to know which of our neighbors need it the most. So by using the Social Vulnerability Index and then adding into that, and that's put out by the CDC, we add into that where is there the highest unemployment rate, where is there the most rental housing assistance, and being able to use those things along with a designated food desert, which as I was talking earlier the distance to a food bank, the distance to a grocery store, if all they can get to is a corner gas station and they're buying a bag of chips and a soda and calling that a meal, we need to make sure that we can bring this product to them to where they've got it because it's not handy for them, it's not close to them.

**Joint Information Center:** OK everyone. This is Kari Bray speaking from the Joint Information Center. I am not seeing any more questions at this time, so we will go ahead and wrap up. Thank you all again for joining us today and please do stay tuned for future media availabilities.