

Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, October 13, 2020, Briefing

Snohomish County Executive Dave Somers: Good morning everybody. Good to see you all. Thanks for joining us today. As you're probably aware, our numbers are increasing again and continue to be a cause for concern. We just have to remember that the power to keep COVID-19 from getting more people sick in our county and in our region and state is really under our control. We just need to continue to wear masks, maintain social distance, and keep our social circles small so we can push the curve back down, and we will do so with everybody's assistance.

We all continue to hope for a vaccine, but the information we have is at best one would likely not be generally available until probably next summer, next spring or summer at best. So that is some time yet that we just really need to keep practicing our protective measures, as I mentioned. So we just really need to keep doing all we can here locally. So we get questions about our response to COVID-19 and how we've used our CARES Act funding. I have to say I'm incredibly proud of our partnership with the Snohomish Health District and the Snohomish County Council. We have from day one been unified in our goals, which are protecting health of the public, saving lives, and we reducing the burden on our healthcare system. And we've also really focused on providing programs to help those in need, whether it's a business, nonprofit organization, or our most vulnerable residents. So thank you for that partnership and it's been strong here in Snohomish County.

So COVID-19 may well be with us for another year or more and we just really need to be prepared for sustaining our response. We can't also count on another round of support from the federal government, but we'll continue to do all we can with the resources we have here locally.

So with that I'd just like to turn it over to Jason Biermann, who is the director of the Department of Emergency Management in Snohomish County. Jason?

Snohomish County Emergency Management Director Jason Biermann: Thanks Executive Somers. Yeah, good morning everyone. Jason Biermann, the director of emergency management. I just wanted to talk about a couple of the key things that we are doing here from the Emergency Coordination Center with the CARES Act funding and how incredibly important it is. And I also want to highlight, I'm not going to touch upon the Health District's work but I know Shawn and chair of the Health District Wright will do that very well, but also wanted to reiterate the great partnership we've had with the Health District. Our reference here really focus on achieving the things outlined in the governor's safe start plan and ensuring that we're taking care of the most vulnerable folks, addressing things like food security, and ensuring that there is personal protective equipment for our first responder, health care workers and the other folks who are in direct contact with people who have COVID-19. So some of the specifics I'll mention with the CARES Act funding we've received, and again express some gratitude to the County Council for the appropriation we received to address public health and the emergency response. We have with the CARES Act funding procured on the order of 20 million pieces of personal protective equipment. That number is based upon what we call burn rates, which is essentially how quickly our responders and health care providers use that type of equipment, so there actually is a model that we use and another that we use to check on how much PPE we project that we'll need. We use that to forecast how much of the equipment we should have on hand and we work closely with local partners in the health care systems, in the fire and EMS community and the law enforcement community, as well as long term care facilities and school

districts to make sure that we're working to ensure they have the personal protective equipment they need to protect themselves.

We've also utilized some funding from CARES Act to provide food security through a program we call Nourishing Neighborhoods. Using that funding we have actually gone to local farmers and worked with other food providers to provide food to our most at-risk neighborhoods. Currently in 14 different locations and we're working on expanding that to 22 separate locations around the county. We utilize a formula that take into account income, the need for assistance with housing as well as transportation and mobility data to identify where the most at-risk populations are and those that are least likely to be able to access food through food banks and our other great supporters who help provide food security and are now working, well will be working in 22 different locations to make sure food gets out to those folks who have challenges getting to food.

We have also continued to run the isolation and quarantine facility. That facility is one of the things that's mandated under the governor's safe start plan as part of our move from phase 1 to phase 2 and under the current guidance. The facility, as many folks know, moved from downtown Everett to the fairgrounds near Monroe and we've been able to maintain that site successfully. It's been available when we've needed it for things such as the potential outbreak in the Everett Gospel Mission when we were able to quickly move about 50 folks out to that site, and currently we're running typically between five and ten folks a day, many of whom are coming in to ensure that they can get tested before they go and access other services they need, primarily unsheltered folks we need to make sure do not have COVID-19 before they access other services, so we've taken the model that we have, we've now made it available to use it for other purposes to ensure the health of people who are providing service for unsheltered folks, and we still have it there as part of the governor's safe start plan and to ensure that if we do have an outbreak in either the unsheltered population or folks who just need another place to either isolate or quarantine, we have that available to them so that they can, we can help protect the community by having that facility available.

So with that, that's just some highlights of things we're doing here with our CARES Act funding, and with that I would like to turn it over to vice chair of the county council and chair of the health board, Stephanie Wright.

Snohomish County Councilmember and Board of Health Chair Stephanie Wright: Thank you Jason and good morning everybody. So few people could have predicted the challenges that we've faced this year. Businesses, nonprofit groups, health care systems, schools, child cares, faith-based organizations, neighborhoods and families, they've all been impacted. We've all had to rethink, retool, and regroup. So I hope you will join me in the immense pride that I have for our hard-working staff at the Snohomish Health District and the Department of Emergency Management, as they have risen to challenge after challenge this year. Thrust into the national and global spotlight with the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States way back in January, and now almost nine months later working with the same determination and passion for protecting the people of Snohomish County. Yet even with these dedicated teams, it has been highlighted how precarious the public health system is locally, statewide and nationally. Had it not been for the emergency allocations from our state legislature and the CARES Act money from the federal government, the Snohomish Health District would not have had the capacity to maintain a sustained and complex response. With those funds the district has been able to hire more than 60 temporary staff to do the contact tracing, testing, and

communications necessary. These positions have also allowed some of our permanent staff to resume their regular job functions. Right now the Snohomish Health District is currently expending about \$700,000 to \$750,000 per month on the response. However, the emergency funding to support these temporary positions and the response efforts is set to expire in December. As the Board of Health chair I am aware of the health district's funding situation. If we were to continue funding the response at the \$700,000 to \$750,000 a month level, we would drain the Health District's reserves before the end of 2021. This means we would have to eliminate most if not all of the temporary positions come January unless the CARES Act funding is extended for another year. Loss of these positions and funding would severely diminish our capacity to continue responding at the same level. Without the capacity to effectively track and investigate cases, to support testing efforts, and to work with partners around the region, our communities, businesses, schools, and children will pay the price. I'm calling on all of you asking you to please reach out to your U.S. senators, your representatives to urge support of extending these critical CARES Act dollars. Thank you. I really appreciate your efforts. And right now, I'd like to turn it over to Shawn Frederick, the Health District's Administrative Officer.

Snohomish Health District Administrative Officer Shawn Frederick: Thank you Chair Wright and good morning everyone. While Dr. Spitters is enjoying some well-deserved time off, he asked that I share a couple of updates with you. We're aware of a growing number of cases involving the Tulalip Boys & Girls Club. At this time, we know of at least 8 confirmed cases. Out of privacy of those involved, we won't be sharing any further details. We encourage anyone who may be concerned about possible exposure or was a close contact to seek testing. Close contacts should remain at home for the full 14 days after their last possible exposure. The Snohomish Health District is working closely with Tulalip Tribes and Boys & Girls Club on the investigation, both of whom have excellent partners.

As our most recent numbers show, COVID is still very much circulating through Snohomish County. Yesterday's published two-week case count was nearly 72 per 100,000 as of October 10. Our staff are inundated with reports of 50 to 70 new cases each day, and given this new case rate and how close it is to the 75 per 100,000 threshold for high risk in the Department of Health decision tree for school, Dr. Spitters did have guidance that was shared with the schools yesterday. He's asked that all schools hold where they're currently at. They don't need to move backwards if they've started to bring special needs students and students in grades K through 3 back, but they shouldn't bring any additional students in at this time. We'll monitor daily case counts this week and see what next Monday's new case rate is and then talk with the schools again during our bi-weekly call next Tuesday on October 20.

The majority of our new cases are the result of too many people in close settings, especially without face coverings. A reminder we're relying on everyone to do their part to stay home if they're sick, limit gatherings with people outside the household, and to mask up.

Now I'll turn it back to Executive Somers for questions.

Dave Somers: OK, if you have any questions go ahead and submit them in the chat please.

OK, first question. Snohomish County has been in same phase for months, what do you attribute rise in cases to and what's the concern moving forward? Shawn, do you want to address that.

Shawn Frederick: Sure, Executive Somers. The closest thing we can attribute it to is really as we have gone through these several months there have been a few holidays and what we've seen is increased gatherings with people who are not within the same household and as we get into the cooler months then we continue to see more and more congregate settings. You know, there's a good chance that we're not maintaining good social distancing when we're in those environments when we're not masking up that those cases may continue to increase.

Dave Somers: The next question, in addition to the facility at the Monroe Fairgrounds, do you have other facilities you can use for emergency cold weather shelters that could be made COVID safe with distancing, proper ventilation? Maybe Jason, I know you've been working on cold weather sheltering. I'll turn it over to you.

Jason Biermann: Yeah, thanks Dave. So right now, yes, we have been planning for cold weather sheltering. There is a facility near Monroe that we're planning as a cold weather site. It is not the same place, it's not the isolation and quarantine site itself. And then another site in south county that we're working with our partners. One of the things that we've already planned and I believe they're actually doing this this week is to actually have staff from the isolation and quarantine site as well as staff from the health district to go out and do an assessment of these facilities and go out and make sure that they are as COVID safe as possible and that we share some best practices for them from what we've done at the isolation and quarantine facility as well as get the input from the health district on ensuring folks are as safe as possible in those cold weather facilities.

Dave Somers: Shawn or Stephanie, you have anything to add on cold weather shelters?

Stephanie Wright: No. I just know we've been working with DEM very closely and I appreciate their support on this issue.

Shawn Frederick: Jason is correct, the initial walk-through, the initial meeting actually starts this week and there are some additional walk-throughs in the coming weeks at the cold weather shelters to make sure that everything is as we expect.

Dave Somers: Also just add that we've convened providers, the cities, the county and other nonprofits to discuss our sheltering needs, not only cold weather shelters but sheltering throughout the year and we're really working hard to better coordinate our efforts. So we need for sheltering that far exceeds the availability, so we recognize it as a particular challenge going forward since we have to have social distancing in place at their shelters so it cuts down the capacity that we've even had in the past, so we're working on that with our providers and we most recently the cold weather shelter in Monroe working with the city of Monroe as Jason mentioned. So it is a concern but the team's on it.

Next question, do you know how Snohomish County rise in cases compares to other counties? Is there a particular concern here? And actually I skipped over one and I'll go back to it in a minute, but do we know how we compare to other counties?

Stephanie Wright: I know Pierce County has been rising in the last few weeks, I think very similar to Snohomish County, but I defer to Jason or Shawn for information on King County.

Shawn Frederick: I'm not aware specifically of King County, but Pierce County has generally been experiencing and increase in cases. And, yeah. Pierce County has, I really can't speak to King County or Skagit for that matter.

Dave Somers: OK, and there was prior question. The outbreaks reported this week show higher infections than were previously seen. Will we be getting more information about those other outbreaks? So you'd mentioned the one at Tulalip Boys & Girls Club. Are there other outbreaks that we're aware of that are sort of centralized?

Shawn Frederick: So what I can say is that in next week's weekly update on Monday, it's going to take some time to do all of the investigations and follow-up as part of any outbreak, so it's something we can talk to in next week's briefing.

Dave Somers: OK. With school districts being asked to pause their reopening, and cases continuing to rise, how likely is it that schools will get to stay open at all? Do we have any insight into that? No, I think we'll have to come back to that next week, but obviously with cases rising and it seems quite evident that people congregating indoors in large groups is just going to be a problem, so, although the health officer has been talking with the schools, I'm not really familiar with what the future plans are but I would say the trend is very concerning.

Another question. I want to clarify what Stephanie Wright said earlier. It sounds like without a new CARES Act deal in Congress, Snohomish County will have to make cuts starting in January? Stephanie I think you were talking about the Health District, but do you want to clarify that?

Stephanie Wright: Correct. That was cuts to the health district's temporary staffing for the contact tracing and communications from those CARES Act. And we don't want to cut positions. We're trying to be proactive. So if we can reach out to Congress and get those CARES Act dollars extended past that deadline, or additional dollars. So that's why we're trying to start that conversation now while we still have three months to plan and figure out a different solution just because we see those services as vital to Snohomish County and our response.

Dave Somers: So the CARES Act dollars that we received in the first round were distributed, a good portion was given to the health district for their activities, contact tracing, testing, etc. but also that's what we used to stand up our small business and business program, rent relief, and other activities, the PPE purchases that Jason mentioned. So they've been really critical, those dollars from Congress have been really critical in helping us respond, so I think we have a general concern that if there are not future allocations of dollars and this drags out for quite some time we're all going to have to be having difficulty maintaining the programs that we've been able to stand up to date.

Is there any indication of what the flu season is shaping up to look like yet? And as a follow up to Simone's question, what would be the impact to the county's COVID response if you do have to make cuts?

Shawn, do you have any insights into the flu season?

Shawn Frederick: Not yet. I know that it's something that Dr. Spitters has been following overseas as obviously they're in a different season than we are. And that will be a great question when he returns next week and make sure that we follow up on that.

Stephanie Wright: But we are encouraging everybody to get their flu shot this year just to be proactive.

Jason Biermann: And Shawn, do you mind? I didn't mention earlier, but part of what we're doing here in the emergency coordination center is a lot of planning around both the flu season and upcoming vaccination, so there's communication among responders and others about the importance of that. So to Chair Wright's point, there's certainly a lot of messaging going out about the need to get a flu shot this year, and a lot of work being done around planning for vaccinations.

Shawn Frederick: And a lot of that messaging is being done with lots of partners, not just here locally in Snohomish County but also regionally and at the state level.

Stephanie Wright: And washing your hands, social distance, and those masks, they help ward off flu just like COVID-19, so keep up those good habits please.

Dave Somers: So there was a follow-up question about if we do not receive further dollars what the impact might be. I know we're well stocked with PPE probably through the end of the year, but things like the isolation and quarantine center at Monroe that's also funded by CARES Act dollars and those will run out at the end of the year. Any thoughts about what happens if we don't get further dollars?

Jason Biermann: Yeah, I mean, the impacts are pretty significant. The isolation and quarantine facility we would have to retool and change significantly. We would have to look at the other programs such as providing the food we are through Nourishing Neighborhoods because that's funded with CARES Act dollars. The assistance we're providing for daycare for essential workers, that's funded as well with, excuse me, with CARES Act dollars. And then as Shawn and Chair Wright both mentioned, the activities the health district's doing, so there would be profound impacts to our response kind of across the board with everything we've been doing to support the community.

Shawn Frederick: Yeah, in that body of work, it's our testing, it's the contact tracers, the additional case investigators we've brought on board, but it's also those teams that we have working with our employers and schools to quickly handle cases to keep people as operational as possible.

Dave Somers: I'd just add that we do not have financial capacity at the county level to continue many of these programs we've been doing this year, PPE purchases, grant programs for businesses and individuals, contact tracing, testing, quarantine and isolation site. Those have all really been made possible by the federal funding and without continued federal funding, as Jason mentioned, a lot of those programs would have to be significantly curtailed or eliminated, so it's of great concern.

Let's see, is there any correlation between an increase in testing and the increase in daily cases?

Shawn Frederick: No. We expect to see, you know, the increase in daily cases is a reflection of an increase in the positivity rate of the number of cases, not the number of tests that are being done themselves. Ideally what we'd like to see as we continue to do more testing is actually see that positivity rate go down with is a good signal to us that we're seeing a decreased transmission of COVID throughout our communities. While we're seeing this increased number of positive cases and this increased positivity rate, it gives us an indication that we're seeing increased transmission of COVID through our community.

Dave Somers: Go back to a question I jumped over. Are we asking the state to access reserves to help weather this?

Well, we do talk with the governor's office almost daily and also our state legislative delegation. I think my concern is this is a statewide problem and it would be extremely difficult for the state to pick up all the programs we've been doing and funding through the CARES Act dollars. So we'll continue to work with them and ask for what assistance they can. They have been good partners. But I do not see the capacity at the state level to continue these programs. We will certainly ask and try to do as much as we can. I don't know, Jason, if you have any insight in your level working with the state.

Jason Biermann: No, I think you've covered it well. I think they're looking as well as we are at solutions once their CARES Act funds go away, as well. So I think it's a struggle across the state, as well.

Dave Somers: If the case trend continues, should people be preparing for the possibility we have to go back to full stay home mode like we were in late March or April? Shawn, I'll pass that to you.

Shawn Frederick: OK. You know, rather than prepare for another stay home period, it would really be a better use of everyone's energy if we limit our social gatherings now and mask up, practice good social distancing, so we don't have to. We absolutely have the ability to control this with our individual efforts, so that's what I would encourage everyone to do.

Dave Somers: Yeah, I'd have to say that it would have to get pretty severe, so we have not been talking about going back to the full stay at home mode, but I think anything's possible depending on how severe this next peak is and how we're doing with hospitalizations and deaths, so, you know, I think all the tools we have in the toolbox are still available but that's not where we want to go. And frankly people need to, even when they're home and inside, need to be practicing caution and safety measures because that's actually a cause for concern is people being inside and confined. So we'll just have to see how it goes here and consult the experts.

Where do hospitalizations due to COVID stand? I know as this case count has risen, hospitalization have risen also. Do we know exactly where we stand, Shawn?

Shawn Frederick: So hospitalizations have increased slightly during the last two-week period. They're still very stable but of course we're monitoring that on a regular basis. At any given point, we have about 20 Snohomish County residents who may be hospitalized either within Snohomish County or in hospitals outside Snohomish County.

Dave Somers: Thank you. I think that wraps us up.

Joint Information Center: Thank you everyone. This is Kari in the Joint Information Center. I appreciate you all joining us this morning, and please do stay tuned for future media availabilities. Thanks.