

COVID-19 MEDIA AVAILABILITY 1/12/21

Dave Somers: Well, thank you. And thank you all for joining us today. Good to see you.

I just want to start off by saying how saddened and deeply disturbed I was, I know all of us are, by last week's events in Washington, DC. Any American who respects our system of government will condemn the attempt to disrupt our constitutional democracy and the peaceful transfer of power and we can take comfort in the knowledge that our democracy helps Congress fulfill their constitutional responsibilities. And Joe Biden will be sworn in as President, on January 20. Here in Snohomish County, we will do all we can do continue to protect and defend our constitutional democracy. We cannot be ruled by mobs or internet rumors, so any other path really leads to disaster.

So now to COVID-19 and our continuing efforts to keep residence healthy and our healthcare system functioning. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we've all been looking forward to the day when we can transition out of our social distancing regimes. We knew it wouldn't be easy and dependent on some incredibly hard work from thousands of people all over the world, really the greatest hope, like so many times before, when we have faced widespread disease is getting a significant portion of our population vaccinated. Now the amazing work has been done to create multiple safe and effective vaccines, for which we are incredibly grateful. We've really turned our attention towards building the infrastructure to help get more people vaccinated quickly, so last week Snohomish County, in partnership with the Health District and Snohomish County Vaccine Task Force, opened our first drive through vaccination site. Another site opened yesterday and we expect more sites will be opened in the coming weeks. And we'll have more details on that.

Our team at the Emergency Coordination Center started vaccine planning in July and when it finally became clear that we would need to supplement the existing system, they very quickly were able to get them open due to a lot of planning done prior to this time. For now, these sites are by reservation only. We strongly urge everybody who is eligible for a vaccination to first call their health care provider. We've done this because the math is simple. We have nearly 900,000 residents. Our goal is to vaccinate everyone. This year, we need additional capacity beyond the existing system and we must do it in an orderly fashion. So right now, of course, we don't have the vaccine supply for mass vaccinations. But we want to be ready when more people become eligible for their vaccine and the federal government releases more supplies.

So we're going to be very forward leaning about getting vaccines into people as quickly as possible. We know some people will be frustrated that they aren't at the front of the line. But we do need to first ensure the health care providers, first responders, and the most vulnerable neighbors receive their doses. Since the vaccine is still in a very limited supply, in the phased approach only those in group 1A are currently eligible, but we expect that 1B, representing some 200,000 more people in Snohomish County, will be eligible in the coming weeks.

If the public is curious about the vaccine phases and when they might be eligible, you can refer to the Snohomish Health District's website or the Washington State Department of Health for those details. After a really tough 12 months, this news should give us hope that by this time next year will be in a much better place, and will continue to focus on this challenge with urgency and until we're through this we will give it the urgency of deserves. So with that, I'd like to hand it over to Katie Curtis from this Snohomish Health District

Katie Curtis: Thank you, Executive Somers, and good morning, everyone. It's my second time here. And it's interesting to see all the people here. So thank you so much for this opportunity.

I want to share a quick update on the numbers before I move on to talking about our vaccine planning. Unfortunately, for the second week, we've seen another increase in our case rates we have gone up from 428 per 100,000 people for the 14 day period ending January 9. This is likely due to transmission happening over the holidays. We also, unfortunately, set a new record for the number of new cases reported to us in one day, which was last Thursday when we had 370 new cases. Our long term care facilities and hospitals are still running very high. We continue to have 100 to 120 Snohomish County residents hospitalized with COVID on any given day and 10 to 15 of those are people requiring mechanical ventilation.

I also want to share a little bit of data in regards to the new "Healthy Washington" framework that was released. DOH report released a report on Friday with data for the regions which indicated that Snohomish County and the Puget Sound region are in the revised Phase one for this week.

Later today, will be posting a revision on our weekly snapshot that shows this numbers county metrics alongside the regions and you can find that on our website under [snohd.org forward slash case counts](https://www.snohd.org/forward/slash/case-counts). So, as the Executive said, we are thick in vaccine planning and getting that out and we have also received a lot of questions and concerns from people who are eager to get vaccinated.

We know that people are anxious and there's a lot of frustration about the fact that you can't get vaccinated sooner. We in public health, and I know the Executive's office and Emergency Management, we all want to get as many people vaccinated as soon as possible.

It's important to remember that most vaccination campaigns occur under non-emergency conditions and take at least a year to plan and several years before we reach good coverage.

Considering multiple vaccines were developed and manufactured within a year of this virus being identified in this country is amazing. And we've already vaccinated thousands of people here in Snohomish County and that timeline is just incredible.

It's also been only one month to the day that the FDA provided emergency use authorization for the first COVID vaccine. So it's just on December 11th that we were provided the recommendations on both who is eligible to receive the vaccine and the prioritization for that vaccine. The first doses of vaccine arrived in Snohomish County on December 17th. So in just over three weeks, we now have 14,000 people in Snohomish County who have received at least one dose of the COVID vaccine. Right now, both doses (both presentations of this vaccine) require two doses 21 or 28 days apart, depending on which one you have received. An entire public health care system is having to reframe their staffing, their space, and materials to implement this vaccine campaign. We need enough vaccine to be distributed to our providers and there needs to be enough providers out there who can provide the vaccine.

It's a huge logistical lift to get this done for scheduling- having locations, having the staff and managing the records to ensure that everyone is given their second dose at the appropriate time.

This is all on top of a pandemic that has already significantly strained systems. So simultaneously working to test those who have been exposed, prevent outbreaks, and treat those who are sick with COVID is a huge lift for all of us.

Our health care providers and other partners are working hard to vaccinate the population that fall into Phase 1A, which totals about 40,000 people in Snohomish County.

So that means people right now who are prioritized for vaccine are workers in healthcare settings, first responders who work in high risk settings and residents and staff of nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and other community based congregate living settings where most individuals over 65 years of age are receiving care supervision or assistance.

With more vaccine providers being approved each day, the capacity to get vaccine out is growing considerably in our county. Snohomish Health District anticipates 8000 to 10,000 doses will be administered by providers this week, and that weekly number will continue to increase as long as a vaccine supply keeps pace.

The Snohomish County Vaccine Task Force has also been working to expand options and vaccinate the early phases more quickly. That task force is coordinating several vaccine sites in Snohomish County. So these sites are meant to enhance vaccination efforts and supplement our existing health care system. However, just as community drive through testing sites do not replace testing throughout the healthcare system, these vaccine vaccination sites are not a replacement for vaccine through health care providers clinics or pharmacy partners.

At this time COVID vaccination in Snohomish County, including at these sites, we are focused on phase one, as laid out by the Washington State Department of Health and prioritization phases.

We don't have specific dates on when future phases will begin, we will continue to provide updated information to our website at www.snohd.org/covidvaccine.

Planning for and standing up large scale vaccine sites is also quite different from testing sites or even flu shot clinics that we are used to. There's an approval process for provider groups and sites.

To give them all of the paperwork filled out, making sure they're trained and making sure they have everything that they need. There specific storage and handling required for each of those vaccines and it's a lot different than what we have seen in the past.

Information needs to be verified for the patient to ensure that they are both eligible for the phase and that they are a candidate for the vaccine based on their own personal medical history.

And we need to provide immunization records for the individual that includes specific lot number and vial that the vaccine came from, because we need to ensure that everyone is given the same vaccine presentation that they were given their first dose.

We also need to make sure that all of this information is entered into the statewide immunization registry.

So vaccinations at these sites are by appointment only and when a person arrives, they're checked in.

We make sure that they have everything filled out. And while the vaccine vaccination only takes a few minutes to administer, everyone is required to wait at least 15 minutes afterwards so we can monitor for adverse reactions to the vaccine.

So far, both in the vaccine trials and the vaccination efforts to date adverse reactions have been rare.

In the coming weeks and months, we expect the COVID vaccine distribution and administration process will become much smoother and the pace of the vaccine vaccinations will increase significantly

For more information about the vaccination sites, I'd like to turn it over to Jason Biermann, the Snohomish County Director of Emergency Management.

Jason Biermann: Thanks, Katie, and good morning, everyone. Thanks for giving us an opportunity to speak with you about what's been going on with the vaccine planning and distribution.

So the planning, as Katie mentioned, has been done primarily by the vaccine task force which is organized and coordinated through the County's Emergency Coordination Center.

We have folks from Emergency Management, Snohomish Health District, our law enforcement community, fire/EMS, our Community Transit providers, as well as a host of others who've been working since the summer in anticipation of COVID vaccine arriving here in Snohomish County.

We have been saying since the start that the first line of defense is really healthcare providers and we are here to help shore up the health care system. We understand that they're under a lot of pressure with just COVID cases and now trying to provide COVID vaccine as well.

We wanted to make sure that we're able to help support them. And so that's really the focus of the work that's being done here in terms of planning and implementation.

We have open now two sites. One of them opened on the sixth of January, and that was that Paine Field. Another opened yesterday, and that one is Edmonds Community College. These sites are by appointment only and they are focused primarily on Phase 1A.

The folks that Katie mentioned the health care providers, primarily in long term care providers who are most likely to be in direct contact with COVID patients.

These sites were planning to continue to run as long as vaccine is available or a partnership with a number of entities and they do require significant logistical challenges.

And that's one of the issues I know when we're asked about the planning taking as long as it did, each of these sites, as Katie mentioned, normally vaccines take up to a year to work through the logistics of distribution. We received the first vaccines here in December and we already have sites open just a few weeks later, it's a significant challenge to find a site that's suitable, find vaccinators, to find support in terms of traffic control security and then to do the messaging, so that the message gets out to the right folks. And all of that work takes a lot of coordination and that's really been the focus of the vaccine task force here. We are looking at opening additional locations throughout the county. Our goal is to ensure that, as the Executive mentioned, that we vaccinate the residents of Snohomish County as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible. So we have additional locations identified and we will activate those depending on the availability of vaccine. And again, to put this in perspective, as Katie mentioned with vaccines, just having arrived a few weeks ago, we already have 14,000 of our residents, primarily health care providers and professionals who are already been vaccinated

There's a lot of work to do as she also mentioned each of these vaccines, at least the two currently available or two doses. So when we talk about the 900,000 or so residence, for us in terms of planning, we're doing that work times two because everyone has to receive a second dose for to be completely effective. But we have a fantastic team here and partnerships throughout the county, who are working to make sure that we can get these locations open to support our health care system and, ultimately, to get folks vaccinated as quickly as possible. So with that, I'm going to turn it back over to the Executive, if there are any questions.

Dave Somers: Great. Yes, thank you, Jason, Katie. We do have a number of questions. First is, will the change in federal policy, now making all vaccine doses available for shipping, change the vaccination policy or approach to in Snohomish County. One of you like to take them?

Katie Curtis: Yes, thank you. Executive Somers. I will say we are watching to see how that is rolled out when and if the federal government really says that all of the vaccine supply that we have on hand in the country, and we will adapt as quickly as possible to any change in guidance that is given. And I'll, I'll simply add that's, that's one of the issues that we planned around was fluctuations and availability both less, and more. So part of the rationale behind having additional sites prepared was to ensure that we could use the vaccine when it's available. So we are preparing for that.

Dave Somers: Here is Snohomish County, working with its counterparts in Pierce and King counties and under the healthy Washington plan, and how much damage does the holiday fuel increase of cases, due to the region's chances of meeting the metrics to move to Phase Two. I'll just start.

First of all, I'm been pretty close contact with King and Pierce counties. I spoke the other day with Executive Dammeier of Pierce County. So we are coordinating at that level of approach and sharing information and ideas and how to get through this. The turnaround in case numbers that Katie mentioned is unfortunate because it's one of the metrics that is required to get to Phase Two, that it's several weeks of decline in case counts and now that's turned around. So that's one of the metrics. So obviously we're now resetting the clock the week later, so we'll just have to wait and see and hope we can turn things around soon.

Jason Biermann: Yeah, I can. I can add Executive Somers, with Sean Frederick, the Health District Administrator and I have twice weekly calls with our counterparts in King, Pierce and Thurston County. So at our level we're interacting with them twice a week to share what we're doing and things that are working and concerns that we have at our level in terms of implementation. So we're getting that twice a week and have been for months now and will continue to do so.

Dave Somers: How do you feel about being lumped in with King and Pierce counties in the Governor's phase one and two reopening plan. I'll just have to say we very much coordinate with King and Pierce as we've already discussed. So that's fine. We understand that we are connected by businesses and transportation networks and just families across borders, etc. So we understand that we're part of a larger region. On the other hand, we've seen throughout the pandemic, times when we've been doing better than other counties and other guys been doing better than us. So I think if we got to the point where Snohomish County was meeting all the criteria, we would be asking the Governor to let us go because our businesses are suffering, our families are suffering, so we very much support what the governor is trying to do.

We understand the rationale, but we're going to have to wait and see how this rolls out. It would be very difficult. If we were clearly meeting all the criteria in the county, as we have in the past, and we're still shut down, so that that's an issue to be discussed down the road. Jason or Katie, do you have anything to add to that.

Katie Curtis: I will say in the public health world, you know, it's a natural flow for us to work with King and Pierce a lot of the times, a lot of our hospital systems are kind of spanning across those county borders. Anyway, so we do work with them as Jason noted, daily and weekly and we would also be watching to see how this impacts Snohomish County. Yeah, in terms of coordination, I would just add, we do work

with them as part of the urban area security initiative region which is a Homeland Security DHS region. So we do have strong working relationships and have for years. So there's a lot of familiarity.

Dave Somers: Okay, next question is would simplifying people eligible for vaccinations to an age group quicken the vaccination process. So that's just a simple, sounds to me like a simple classification of age groups. Who would like to address that?

Katie Curtis: There are pros and cons to simplifying who is eligible for the vaccine. We also have to balance that with the supply and the demand. We don't have kind of a full throttle supply vaccine coming into the county. So we do need to have a somewhat thoughtful process and how we roll this out, but we are hoping to ramp this up as quickly as supply allows us to.

Dave Somers: Has the Health District heard anything from the state about shifting guidance into the new CDC recommendations which say to give everybody which 65 and older the availability to the vaccine. Second question is, any idea how many long term care homes have gotten vaccines, Katie?

Katie Curtis: Yeah, we are watching Department of Health and the federal partners to see how these new guidelines may or may not be rolled out, you know as the vaccine supply increases. We do expect more people to become eligible and as Jason noted, we are forward thinking in and planning for that to be able to meet the demand. Once we have the supply and once those phases are opened up a little bit more broadly. I don't have the long term care facility numbers at the at my hands right now, but it's something I can research and get back to everyone.

Dave Somers: Okay, the next question was also about the 65 minute Issue. So I think we've covered that we will respond to whatever the criteria that were given by CDC and the state and it's kind of a two level process that Federal CDC and then the state filters that also. So, we will again try to match our capacity to give back scenes to both the supply and the groups that are available to them. We do need to keep this orderly way. However, though, there is a time issue we've talked about this last week. There's a bit of an issue with these mass vaccination sites and that once a person has given the vaccine. They have to remain on the site for at least 15 minutes. So there's a natural sort of throttle on the flow through these sites that we were trying to manage through, but we really do want to get people to vaccine as quickly as we can and match our vaccination program with the supply.

There's a question: Please help me understand your voucher program and why Snohomish County added this extra step for affiliated healthcare workers. The State says employers can write about your letter for their when a healthcare worker and they can go get the vaccine. Why are you adding this extra little screen with county vouchers. Okay, I know, Katie.

Katie Curtis: Yeah, I can address that. So we implemented our about your process as kind of a stopgap while DOH rolls out their phase finder process. This was never meant to impede anyone from getting the vaccine who is eligible. It was more of our way to make this a little bit easier on health care providers and employers. We could quickly send out vouchers to all of their employees to say, here you go to show this at the site and we can get you vaccinated. So we're hoping it's not impeding anyone from getting the

vaccine who is eligible. This was just meant to be a kind of a bandaid measure until the Phase Finder is opened up and to help make it a little bit easier logistically on our employers to send people

Dave Somers: It was a concern the cases and hospitalizations are going to get worse as a result of the recent holidays. Yeah, we've already mentioned, yes, case rates are going up and it's not quite clear whether what was going on over the holidays. Maybe people were not getting tested as much. This was seen in many other places, not just an Snohomish County, but we've always been concerned about the holiday get-togethers causing increases. And I think we're seeing that play out. Okay, do you have anything else?

Katie Curtis: No, I will say around most of the major holidays, we have seen a bump in in case rates as people tend to congregate together a little bit more. So it was not unexpected for us.

Dave Somers: Let's see, we continue to hear that supply is the concern related to getting back sessions out but the county, state and country have vaccinated far fewer people than vaccines on hand already distributed. Please respond to why we are vaccinating just a fraction of the available vaccines with less stringent vaccine eligibility requirements allow us to use more of the available vaccine.

Katie Curtis: I can address that. So, as we get more vaccine sites approved to provide the vaccine and providers able to administer that vaccine. The majority of the vaccine in our county will be gone by the middle of next week. So unless we get more vaccine, we are seeing a little bit of supply crunch in the county, but we are working diligently to get that vaccine out as quickly as possible and as quickly as it comes in to the county

Jason Biermann: And if I can add, I think it's also important to remember, you know, a significant part of the phasing or the concept behind it is to ensure those folks who are most at risk are getting attended to, first to take pressure off of the health care system. So getting them in and getting them back sedated it sometimes appears as though it's not happening that quickly but it's a very targeted group for a very specific reason. And that's to take pressure off of the health care system and protect those providers. So it's going to roll out slowly, knowing that we're trying to purposely target a small population at the start.

Dave Somers: Yeah, I would have to say it was mentioned earlier, we've been planning for this since the middle of last year. And so we knew this was coming. And so we do not have the situation where we've heard about in other parts of the Country where there's a big supply that's just sitting not going out, we've been mentioned rapidly ramping up and at the current rate will be through all our supply by next week, so I think other parts of the country. Maybe people that were expecting somebody to come in and stand up a vaccination program quickly are going to be struggling, but that is not the case in Snohomish County. Any idea if the state's phase finder will give older folks, who aren't internet savvy, a way to know their spot in line?

Katie Curtis: I can address that. So we are hoping that as the Phase Finder rolls out, that health care providers do a little bit out a little bit of outreach to their patient population to let them know that they are

potentially eligible and how they can sign up. So I think there will be a multi-pronged approach. It won't just be "go to this website", it will be "here's a website, your providers reaching out to you, community groups are helping reach out." So we will be doing kind of a broad outreach to people, to make sure that even if you are not internet savvy or may not have internet access that you are still able to get access to the vaccine as you're eligible

Dave Somers: So that's I think that's it. That's all the questions. I see. And we're at the end of our time here today, Kristin.

Joint Information Center: All right, this is Kristen and the Joint Information Center. Thank you again for joining us today and for your questions. We're going to go ahead and wrap up, please stay tuned for future media availabilities