

**WHATCOM COUNTY
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**



AB2020-116 3/12/2020
Special Health Board
From: The Health Dept.
(via Tyler Schroeder)
**GREG STERN, M.D., HEALTH
OFFICER**

March 12, 2020

Whatcom County Health Board,

We recognize that each of you have many questions and concerns related to the COVID-19 outbreak, which just yesterday was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. We want to assure you that our goal is to provide all our constituents – including each of you – with accurate information and guidance in as timely a manner as possible. We also see you as incredibly important partners as we respond to this crisis.

With this rapidly evolving situation comes rapidly evolving information and guidance. As we collectively learn more about the virus and how it spreads, our federal and state guidance continues to be modified, resulting in frequently changing directives to our own local health jurisdiction. These continuous changes then require additional communication and coordination with our local healthcare partners, as well as revising and updating our public messages and our recommendations to local stakeholders such as schools, businesses, community groups, and many others. As a result we are not always able to answer questions and inquiries as quickly as we would during normal day to day operations.

We know you all are receiving numerous calls, questions, concerns and even suggestions related to COVID-19 and we want you to have the information you need to answer them. We, too, are receiving a high volume of calls. In addition to increased call volumes to and from our healthcare providers by our Public Health Nurses related to COVID-19 testing and surveillance, our call volume from the general public is also currently three times the normal amount. Our dedicated team of Public Information Officers is also monitoring social media, handling press inquiries, and ensuring our public communications align with the most current federal, state and local recommendations. In addition, a team of Liaison Officers are continuously communicating with schools, civics organizations, partner agencies, non-profits and others to field questions and resource requests. All of this information helps inform our overall situational awareness, and development and prioritization of response strategies.

We would like to develop a plan that efficiently gets you the information you need to be informed communicators about this crisis as well as informed decision-makers taking into account the high demands currently on the agencies responding to this crisis. We are now preparing to enter into Unified Command. We are requesting that as the Health Board you develop a method to consolidate your information requests and send them to the Executive's Office no more than once per day. The Executive Office will then determine which departments or branches of Incident Command need to respond and gather the information for you. Having a more standardized and consistent process of receiving strategic recommendations – as well as any general questions – will help enable our Incident Management Team to better incorporate this information into the ongoing strategic and tactical incident planning processes, and reduce staff time spent responding to individual questions and requests.

We share the same goal of responding to this public health crisis in a way that best serves all Whatcom County residents. We look forward to developing a clearer information exchange plan to help us achieve this goal.

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COMMAND STRUCTURE

Have we moved to Unified Command? We assess the command structure daily during coordination calls with incident support agencies such as Fire, EMS, Healthcare, and Emergency Management. And are now moving toward Unified Command structure.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

What is the timeline and availability of cleaning supplies and PPE? The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the availability of PPE not only locally, but across our state, nation, and around the globe. We are working with healthcare partners to source products locally if available, and we already have started supplying local skilled nursing facilities with stock from our limited pandemic response reserves. We continue to process all healthcare resource requests to the State Emergency Management Division through the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office – Division of Emergency Management, and we are also working diligently to access supplies from the Strategic National Stockpile.

TESTING AND SURVEILLANCE

Have we established requirements of all healthcare providers to submit patient information for any potential case and to report all COVID-19 tests to the Health Department immediately? In general, providers are not required to report they are testing a person, however we ask that they notify us of patients being tested who are hospitalized or have contact with a confirmed case, and not wait for the lab confirmation. Our role is to support individual health care providers in providing the best clinical care to their individual patients while also strategically using testing information for our surveillance activities.

Have we established a requirement to immediately submit test results of any known case to the Health Department? All lab-confirmed COVID-19 infections are reported to DOH, CDC, and local health departments, whether tested through public health labs or commercial labs.

SCHOOLS

Are we going to close schools? While we are not recommending targeted or widespread closures at that time, some districts have made the decision to close schools temporarily, either for a few days to do a deep clean or for a longer duration. Closures can be effective in reducing the spread of disease. However, how effective a closure will be must be weighed against the impacts it causes. School closures or dismissals have wide-reaching impacts in the community. When schools close, education is disrupted. For example, when we think about closing schools, we need to consider the downstream effects, such as:

- Parents and caregivers who need to find care for their children who are now not at school.
- Children and their families who regularly depend on school breakfasts and lunches as a reliable source of food.
- Employers who could lose productivity or have to limit their services because parents or caregivers may need to stay home to care for their children.
- Decreased staffing for healthcare and other critical services if parents have to choose between going to work and caring for their school children.

We defer to school districts on their plans for continuity of education. We know that school closures may become necessary as part of this response effort, and we encourage districts to plan for alternative learning options. Schools should also consider ways to reduce inequitable impacts of school closures.

We are in communication with school districts in Whatcom County about these difficult decisions. We know that the leaders in our school districts are our best partners in deciding the right next steps for their schools because they know the needs of their school communities well.