



Skagit County Public Health

Jennifer Johnson, Director
Howard Leibrand, M.D., Health Officer

May 22, 2020

Governor Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Secretary John Wiesman
Washington State Department of Health
101 Israel Road; MS: 47890
Tumwater, WA 98504-7890

Re: Variance Criteria for Phase 2

Dear Governor Inslee and Secretary Wiesman:

We are writing today to respectfully request that you reevaluate the variance criteria and allow Skagit County to move forward to Phase 2 as soon as an application can be reviewed and authorized. Skagit County has been a leader in the state in testing capability, contract tracing, disease investigation and proactive outreach. We are ready to move forward to Phase 2 at any time and urge you to allow us to do so.

Skagit County has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response. On March 10th, Dr. Howard Leibrand, Skagit County's Health Officer, became the first Washington health officer outside of King, Pierce or Snohomish County to restrict in-person gatherings and issue other strong social distancing recommendations. He made these decisions before any statewide recommendations. Skagit County is not shy about doing what is necessary to protect our community, and we do not underestimate the serious threat this disease poses.

Skagit County is prepared to track and control any outbreak or surge that may occur as we begin to reopen businesses. Since COVID-19 was first identified in Snohomish County, we have worked tirelessly to build a robust contact tracing and disease investigation protocol. Since late April, with our Unified Command, Skagit County has operated a high volume drive through test site that allows rapid testing of symptomatic people, exposed people, and anyone recommended for testing or concerned that they are infected. These are the two most critical systems to slow the spread of COVID-19 and keep the population safe until a vaccine is developed. Despite messaging regarding public health infrastructure statewide, Skagit County has had a robust response from the beginning - including contact tracing and now testing.

Skagit County Public Health initiated a robust pandemic response even before we had the first case in our county. Our efforts have included, but have not been limited to the following activities:

- Investigate every case and traced every close contact—including probable cases—using communicable disease investigation protocols developed before DOH protocols were available. This has included case interviews, contact tracing, personalized voluntary isolation and quarantine letters, referral to testing, provision of safe quarantine and isolation facilities at a leased motel, and employer outreach to identify additional cases and prevent further spread.
- Created a database in March for case management and contact tracing follow-up, which has allowed rapid identification of outbreaks. We also became one of the first counties in the state to track outbreaks in WDRS.

- Built a robust employer outreach team to follow up with employers of cases to assure that we have complete information on close contacts and to intervene in further spread at the workplace. We have effectively worked with employers to control outbreaks in their facilities.
- Initiated and continue sector-based outreach to government and tribal partners, faith based communities, child care facilities, schools, long term care facilities, hospitals, essential businesses, food establishments and more.
- Provide our full suite of services in English and Spanish, including bi-lingual case investigation and contact tracing, a translated website, a 7 day/week call line, and local funding for a grassroots Latinx outreach campaign.
- Complete Monday through Friday check-ins to every Skilled Nursing and Long Term Care Facility and weekly check-ins with adult family homes and senior housing facilities and assured rapid access to testing supplies and laboratory testing when any staff or residents showed symptoms of COVID-19 or there was an exposure concern.
- Established isolation and quarantine facilities for all people that were unable to safely isolate or quarantine at home and that were willing to move the facilities.
- Under our Unified Command, established the Skagit County COVID-19 Drive Through Test site. The site opened to the public on April 27, and we have submitted over 2,400 specimens through May 19. Through the first 3 weeks of public testing we have had a 3.7% test positive rate. We are able to test more than 200 people per day at the site.
- Initiating follow-up to reports of positive serology.

We urge you to weigh this robust public health infrastructure more heavily in the re-opening metrics. It is also our hope that you will emphasize this preparedness and response in your public briefings to build more trust in our public health system. Our priorities have not waivered and continue to prioritize containing the spread of the virus, protecting people at highest risk, supporting our partners in this effort, assuring the public has the most up to date information, and decisions are made with the best science we have available.

Further, we request that you please rely on locally-reported data as you consider variance requests. The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) has been using incomplete data in reporting our percent positive test results. Due to some problems with the reporting system, DOH is reporting our percentage positive as 14%, but our epidemiologist estimates that the rate is closer to 5%. We are working with DOH to resolve the issue, but ask that you be aware and only consider complete data when making these decisions.

The immediate closures of many businesses, services, institutions and schools was absolutely necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19 and prevent widespread devastation. We are thankful that you made that difficult decision, even when facing dissent. However, this cannot be a long-term solution. It will be at least 12-18 months before a vaccine is developed and Skagit businesses will not survive a prolonged closure. COVID-19 was one public health crisis, but we fear that prolonged closures and unnecessary restrictions will create many others.

Sustained closures and continued emphasis on a lack of public health readiness undermines trust in our local public health system at a time when it is needed most. We respectfully request that you reconsider the current one-size-fits-all metrics and recognize that Skagit County Public Health is now in a position to protect its population for Phase 2 activities. We urge you to allow us to move forward today, and by June 1st at the latest.

SKAGIT COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH

700 South 2nd Street Room #301 Mount Vernon, WA 98273 (360) 416-1500 Fax (360) 416-1501

Respectfully,

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH


Jennifer Johnson, Director



Dr. Howard Leibbrand, Health Officer

BOARD OF HEALTH


Commissioner Ron Wesen, Chair


Commissioner Kenneth A. Dahlstedt


Commissioner Lisa Janicki


Dr. Connie Davis

DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT


Sheriff Don McDermott