

March 24, 2020

Letter to the community regarding COVID-19

This is a time for patience and for compassion. It's a time for common sense, and it's a time to rely on trusted and science-based sources of information. Unless you are an essential worker, PLEASE STAY HOME to protect yourself from COVID-19. If you are a person at high risk for complications due to COVID-19, stay home for your own protection. If you are not at high risk, and are not an essential worker, stay home anyway, not only to avoid getting infected, but to avoid spreading the disease to others. This is not being paranoid or alarmist, this is being careful. Now is not the time to go on a road trip or a vacation to the beach. The more time you spend out of your "environment" the more risk you take of encountering the virus.

Measures are in place to restrict visits to public places and to tighten up infection control measures for health care and long-term care facilities. This will decrease the risk of COVID-19. Medical clinics, hospitals and health care providers are preparing to take care of more patients. Elective surgeries and routine dental and doctor visits are being rescheduled to help conserve needed protective gear for health care workers and to decrease risk of exposure.

We have seen the number of confirmed cases in Thurston County rise from 1 to 11 in a week. This rise in cases was expected, but it is important to understand that the number of confirmed cases does not truly represent the burden of disease in our community. As more testing resources are made available, we will identify more cases. We will reach out to those people, and to their close contacts. We will direct them to stay in self quarantine, and to watch for signs and symptoms of disease needing medical intervention.

There is no medication approved for COVID-19. There is no vaccine available to prevent it. Patients infected with COVID-19 are all isolated appropriately and asked to monitor for symptoms that signal the need for medical support. Of the first 11 confirmed cases, 6 had underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk, 4 were hospitalized and have since been discharged home to continue their recovery. One case is in their 20's, two cases are in their 30's, 3 in their 40's, 3 in their 50's and 2 in their 60's. We can now report that as of 3/22/2020, we have had 521 negative tests and 11 positive tests assigned to Thurston County from the state reporting system.

Just because you may not be at HIGH RISK, does not mean you are at NO RISK. Anyone can get COVID-19. While lower risk people may be less likely to have severe symptoms and complications, it is still possible. Protect yourself and your community by staying home if you can. IF YOU THINK YOU MIGHT HAVE COVID-19, please self-quarantine.

Testing resources are still limited. These limitations are not just about the tests themselves. There are shortages at many steps in the process. There are, however, community-based testing locations set up by Providence St Peter Hospital. These locations are available *only to any member of the public who is at high risk, AND who has symptoms*. Physicians and clinics are also testing in their offices. We are monitoring illness reports from senior living and skilled nursing care facilities, and they continue to report some influenza cases. They have been testing and have not identified COVID-19, so far (3/23/20).

*Testing is not a sufficient protection measure. There is no logical way to identify everyone who is infected with COVID-19. A negative COVID-19 test today does not mean someone won't have a positive COVID-*

19 test tomorrow. There are many reports of people who experience no symptoms, or mild symptoms. Even people with NO symptoms can still pass the virus to someone else. This is why social distancing *from everyone* is so important *for everyone*. Unless someone needs medical intervention (a hospital), even a positive test means self-isolation at home and all the usual self-care for illness.

We've heard a lot of concern in the community about Public Health and Social Services (as well as the State Health Department) not releasing enough information about where our confirmed cases live, work or places they have been. Understand, regardless of where each of these folks have been—they all live in our community—in our neighborhoods. They shop in our stores and work in our community. Many more people who are not that sick, and who have not been diagnosed have also been out and about in our community. *There is no place where you can be guaranteed to not have any exposure, unless you are at home. Social distancing from everyone is the best protection.* Washing your hands and not touching your face also protects you. We can help protect others by covering our cough, washing our hands and staying home when we are sick.

Next time you are ready to head out the door, ask yourself – do I really need to do this? When you are not working, it is so tempting to take a road trip or go on vacation somewhere. Now is not the time. Movement of people spreads the disease. Being out of your home environment increases your risk, and the risk for others. If you want to go outside for fresh air, or exercise, do so *with social distancing*. There should be at least six feet of space between you and any person near you.

We do not want people gathering where it is hard to maintain social distancing. We do not want you to have friends over for a party. We do not want you to get together for your weekly card game, book club, or choir practice unless you can do it virtually. Some folks need to work to keep our society infrastructure functioning. Everyone needs groceries from time to time. Please help everyone stay safe by keeping your distance. Please treat your neighbors with compassion. Call and check on people when you can.

All of us practicing social distancing and good hand hygiene can interrupt the spread of this disease if we work together. Spring is here and the flowers are in bloom. Do try to get some fresh air and exercise but do so in your home or neighborhood, at least 6 feet away from others. Take deep breaths and notice all that we have to be grateful for. We will get through this. I am asking for your full cooperation. Stay home and stay healthy!

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