



A Joint Framework for Re-opening Whatcom County's Economy

For immediate release on May 13, 2020

Introduction

The effects of COVID-19 continue to ripple across communities, markets, and governments worldwide. Until there is an effective vaccine, effective treatment or widespread immunity, community interventions will continue to be necessary in order to reduce and suppress the spread of COVID-19. Despite this, many are eager to get Whatcom County back to business. With the highest goal always being public safety and health, Whatcom County Health Department and the Regional Economic Partnership at the Port of Bellingham intend to work side-by-side to ensure a safe, healthy re-opening of our local economy.

Safe Start Washington

On May 4, 2020 Washington State Governor Jay Inslee's Office issued Safe Start Washington: A Phased Approach to Recovery (see Appendix A for the full document). This document essentially outlines the data-driven approach to the public health side of the COVID-19 outbreak and details how the State Department of Health will monitor the disease progression as well as the readiness capacity of the state health care system. It then describes the Four-Phased Approach, which requires that the public continue to Stay at Home, Stay Healthy until Phase 4. That means that while businesses reopen, schools, daycare facilities, events, and large public gatherings will remain closed. The State has determined that every Phase will remain in place for a minimum of three weeks to allow for one full incubation period and time to analyze the data and compare it to the state's dashboard benchmarks for health care systems readiness, testing capacity and availability, case and contact investigations, and ability to protect high-risk populations.

Phase 1 reopens essential business, existing construction, landscaping, automobile, boat, and RV sales, retail (curb-side pick up or delivery only), car washes, and pet walkers. This phase is scheduled to begin May 5, 2020.

Phase 2 reopens all construction, in-home and domestic services, retail (with some in-store purchases allowed), real estate, professional services, hair and nail salons, pet grooming, and restaurants (50% capacity, table size no larger than 5). This phase will start no earlier than May 26, 2020 and is dependent upon criteria discussed below in Section 3a: Role of the Whatcom County Health Department.

Phase 3 reopens restaurants (75% capacity, table size no larger than 10), movie theaters (50% capacity), customer-facing government services, libraries, museums, all other businesses not listed except for nightclubs and events with greater than 50 people. This phase will start no earlier than June 16, 2020, and is dependent upon criteria discussed below in Section 3a: Role of the Whatcom County Health Department.

Phase 4 reopens nightclubs, concert venues, large sporting events, and allows the unrestricted staffing of worksites. This phase will start no earlier than July 7, 2020, and is dependent upon criteria discussed below in Section 3a: Role of the Whatcom County Health Department.

All phases require employers to:

1. Maintain the six-foot physical distancing requirements for employees and patrons.
2. Adopt other prevention measures such as barriers to block sneezes and coughs when physical distancing is not possible for a particular job task.
3. Provide services while limiting close interactions with patrons.
4. Provide adequate sanitation and personal hygiene for workers, vendors and patrons.
5. Ensure employees have access to hand washing facilities so they can wash their hands frequently with soap and running water.
6. Ensure frequent cleaning and disinfection of the business, particularly of high-touch surfaces.
7. Identify personal protective equipment (PPE) and cloth facial coverings in accordance with L&I requirements on facial coverings and industry specific COVID-19 standards. Provide the necessary PPE and supplies to employees.
8. Identify strategies for addressing ill employees, which should include requiring COVID-19 positive employees to stay at home while infectious, and potentially restricting employees who were directly exposed to the COVID-19 positive employee. Follow CDC cleaning guidelines to deep clean after reports of an employee with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 illness. This may involve the closure of the business until the location can be properly disinfected.
9. Educate employees about COVID-19 in a language they best understand. The education should include the signs, symptoms and risk factors associated with COVID-19 and how to prevent its spread.
10. On a case-by-case basis, as directed by federal, state and local public health and workplace safety officials, implement other practices appropriate for specific types of businesses, such as screening of employees for illness and exposures upon work entry, requiring non-cash transactions, etc.
11. Follow requirements in Governor Inslee's Proclamation 20-46 High-Risk Employees – Workers' Rights.
12. Keep a safe and healthy facility in accordance with state and federal law, and comply with COVID-19 worksite-specific safety practices, as outlined in Governor Inslee's Stay Home, Stay Healthy Proclamation 20-25, and in accordance with the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries General Coronavirus Prevention Under Stay Home, Stay Healthy Order and the Washington State Department of Health Workplace and Employer Resources & Recommendations.
13. Challenge Seattle and the Washington Roundtable have developed a business checklist which is a great starting point for businesses as they prepare for a Safe Start. Our shared goal is to establish clear requirements that everyone can understand and apply — employers, workers and customers.
14. Businesses are also expected to implement any additional requirements developed specifically for their industry, such as those that have been established for construction.

Implementation in Whatcom County

Role of Whatcom County Health Department

On March 10, 2020 Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu, in coordination with the Whatcom County Health Board, declared a Whatcom County public health emergency to reduce the spread of COVID-19. All Whatcom County governments have been consolidated under a Unified Command, so response efforts occur through a single coordinated and common front. The Whatcom County Health Department, led by Erika Lautenbach, has been designated the lead agency for Whatcom Unified Command and is directing the public health efforts to combat COVID-19 throughout the county. These include activities to create readiness in the Governor's dashboard benchmarks for reopening, which are:

- Health Care System, to maintain adequate capacity to respond to virus spread in the community
 - Convening healthcare providers to increase testing, share resources, increase coordination, and create expansion and contraction plans, based on medical needs
- Case and Contact Investigations, to increase understanding of disease behavior and spread to support containment and mitigation,

- Calling all confirmed cases within the same day and determine their known contacts and those who could be exposed
- Calling all potential contacts within 1-2 days and encourage testing at the Health Department or at their Primary Care Provider
- Training staff and volunteers to increase ability to maintain contact benchmarks with increases in number of cases
- Testing Capacity and Availability, to provide information about who has the virus to contain spread and prevent infection
 - Providing guidance to providers on who to test, which includes all individuals with symptoms or are associated with a cluster/outbreak or are a known contact of a confirmed case
 - Ensuring local testing supplies and capacity exists to test the above priority individuals
 - Responding to outbreaks with rapid testing and providing testing to priority individuals, especially those without insurance or a Primary Care Provider
- Ability to Protect High-Risk and Populations, to reduce the cases that result in severe illness and death
 - Providing guidance and technical assistance to long-term care facilities on infection control best practices
 - Responding to long-term care outbreaks with rapid testing, on-site assistance, and regular follow up
 - Collecting and disseminating demographic data on cases, hospitalizations and deaths

Whatcom Unified Command is supporting the Whatcom County Health Department's COVID-19 response efforts by supporting planning for and management of isolation and quarantine facilities, leading efforts for surge planning, monitoring supplies of PPE, and fulfilling PPE requests.

The Whatcom County Health Department, mirroring the State Department of Health, will monitor data to assess Whatcom County's four dashboard benchmarks, readiness and capacity for safely reopening businesses and modifying physical distancing standards. In order to re-open businesses and industries, the disease burden must be low and remain low.

In order to ensure the safety of everyone in Whatcom County, the Health Department is creating a task force that will provide tools, best practices, and guidance for bringing businesses back to work while maintaining and improving infection control and social distancing.

The Task Force will provide peer- and association-led opportunities to share information on procedures, implementation challenges, and group problem-solving. The Task Force will work to develop a set of best practices and guidelines for ensuring businesses have measures in place to protect their employees, customers, and clients from the risk of infection with COVID-19.

The Task Force will convene the week of May 11 and will complete its work within an approximately two-month period. Phase 2 businesses and organizations will be prioritized in anticipation of potential re-opening in late May or early June.

The Health Department will continue to issue guidance to restaurants, businesses and community organizations via their [website](#) and [social media](#).

[Role of the Port of Bellingham's Regional Economic Partnership \(REP\)](#)

As the associate development organization (ADO) for Whatcom County, REP's role typically is to assist businesses to come to Whatcom County and to expand and grow in Whatcom County.

As COVID-19 has put immense pressure on local businesses, with nearly half reporting that they had closed their operations resulting in over \$28 million in losses for just over 400 businesses ([Whatcom County General Survey](#)

[Report 2020](#)). As the economic implications of COVID-19 continue to transpire, REP’s role will be to ensure as many businesses in Whatcom County survive as possible.

In order to achieve this objective, the REP will focus on the following activities as they relate to monitoring and mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on the local economy and Whatcom County businesses.

Monitor Impacts	Mitigate Impacts
Survey businesses on experiences (general and fishing)	Provide businesses resource information via our website and social media ; financial resources and tools, re-opening guidance
Communicate with business leaders	Communicate business needs to decision makers, partners, elected leaders
Communicate with partners, local, state, and federal elected representatives, service providers, city and county staff	Connect businesses to local needs, opportunities, and creative solutions to disruptions
Track federal, state, and local loan, grant, and disaster relief programs, stimulus packages	Market Whatcom County as a safe, responsible, and healthy place to do business

Table 1. Tasks associated with REP’s efforts to monitor and mitigate the economic impacts of COVID-19 on Whatcom County’s economy.

REP will also carry out two critical tasks to re-opening Whatcom County’s economy. The first challenge that REP will take on is organizing and facilitating a 90-day panel of experts on starting the local economy back up. This panel will provide sector-specific, data-driven information so that REP, the Health Department, and local leaders and decision makers can ensure the safe re-opening of as many of Whatcom County’s businesses as possible.

The REP team will also assist Whatcom County with the programming and implementation of the CARES Act. This will include identifying local businesses and nonprofits who have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak and require funding assistance.

Contact information

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