

OPINION



the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘Our job is to make sure that people don’t get sick’

Clatsop County’s update this week on testing for the coronavirus was striking for the one word that was in all capital letters.

“At the current time the Public Health Department is NOT conducting COVID-19 tests,” the statement said. “But many labs, public and private, are working hard to ramp up their capacity to test more samples and the expectation is that in a very short time frame there will be a considerable expansion of access to testing.”

The Oregon State Public Health Laboratory and private labs like Quest Diagnostics and LabCorp have been processing most of the tests so far, with others, like Providence Health & Services, coming online.

The lack of testing has left many residents frustrated. Some worry they have the virus but do not have severe enough symptoms to qualify for one of the

limited test kits. Others wonder how the government can order sweeping restrictions on daily life when there is such a stark data gap.

The Oregon Health Authority reports that only about 2,550 tests have been taken statewide.

In an interview on Thursday, Michael McNickle, the county’s public health director, said the county’s interest is not the number of tests being done, but what to do when the results are positive for the virus.

Q: There has been a breathtaking escalation in the government’s response to the coronavirus. What advice do you have for residents to cope?

A: One thing is to make sure you do follow the recommendations by the governor, her executive orders, as well as public health. (Oregon Health Authority), on their website, as well as ours, we have a number of things residents can do to protect themselves from getting covid.

And, again, you can prevent yourself from getting covid by following social distancing, good hygiene and not going around people who are sick.

Make sure you do things for yourself to keep yourself in a state of mental soundness. It’s not all doom and gloom. There’s still lots of things that are positive in life. Try to focus on those and public health will keep trying to combat it on our end.

Q: What is the status of testing in our county?

A: So, currently, we don’t do any community testing because we just don’t have the resources nor the test kits available.

It is available if people want to get their test — or has all the symptoms — they need to contact their primary care provider. And see if they can get it through their primary care provider. And, again, that’ll be on a case-by-case basis.

But, right now, we don’t have the test kits or the availability to do community testing.

Q: How many tests have been completed to date in the county?



Michael McNickle is Clatsop County’s public health director.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

‘SO IT’S ALMOST A PERFECT STORM OF TWO THINGS HAPPENING AT THE SAME TIME. INFLUENZA A PEAKING, AND CORONAVIRUS. SO THAT’S THE DIFFICULTY IN THIS SITUATION.’

A: That’s a tough question, because we don’t know how many are being done by private labs. So Quest and LabCorp are the two labs that are taking the private tests.

We’re not notified of how many tests were done. We would only be notified if one of them was positive.

Q: Has the county pressed Columbia Memorial Hospital, Providence Seaside Hospital and other health care providers to disclose the number of tests so we have some idea of the scope?

A: No, we haven’t asked that question.

Q: Why haven’t you?

A: The most important thing we’re interested in is when we do have a positive case. That’s what we’re interested in.

The number of tests really don’t tell you anything other than there’s a bunch of people who were tested. But that doesn’t give us any information to act on.

Q: The county’s population is about 39,000. What is the county’s working model for how many people will get the virus?

A: We don’t have a working model. Our goal is to have as little community spread of the virus as possible.

So, right now, as of the third week

of this emergency, we have no cases in Clatsop County ... That’s our goal, is try to keep it to the minimum. So I don’t really have a projected model. I don’t think anybody has actually done that work.

Our goal used to be containment, and now it’s mitigation. But I think the containment piece is what we’re really focusing on. That’s what all these emergency actions are for, is really trying to bend the curve from peaking. If we can keep that in Clatsop County, that would be the best outcome ever.

Q: How can the county plan when you don’t know if you’re going to have 10 cases or 10,000?

A: We plan for medical surge. We’ve been working with the two hospital systems to make sure that we do have capacity.

As soon as we get a first case — if we get a first case — we would follow up and determine what does that look like on a numbers basis. How many contacts did they have? Do we follow up with them? And then we would see where we would go.

But it’s really hard to predict, because this coronavirus goes from one day it’s two cases one place, the next day, it’s 18. That’s really difficult to measure.

Q: The government restrictions are a significant blow to the North Coast’s

economy. Hundreds and hundreds of people are out of work. What do you say to people who think the government is overreacting?

A: As a public health employee, our job is to make sure that people don’t get sick. That’s what we’re trying to do.

And if you follow these social distancing activities, then those numbers will be reduced. If we were to continue business as usual, and allowing mass gatherings and so forth, the inevitability is we’d have more cases.

But the stronger action government takes — as has been shown in other government agencies, around the world, in other places — those kind of actions do have an effect on dropping the curve.

Q: A few weeks ago, you said the virus was no “worse than any flu you see normally.” How would you describe it today?

A: Well, it’s still like most flus or other viruses. If you’re elderly, it has a much bigger effect than it does on people who are younger.

We’re seeing people who are 60 and older who have comorbidity, or underlying causes, the ones who are really getting affected or ending up in the hospital and having to go and do some pretty important interventions.

It does seem to have more of an effect for those folks than the regular flu. But, again, the regular flu is in our county right now, and it still can have a major effect on people who are over 60 and immune compromised.

So it’s almost a perfect storm of two things happening at the same time. Influenza A peaking, and coronavirus. So that’s the difficulty in this situation.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

PUBLISHER’S NOTEBOOK

Local news matters

By now, you’re as weary as we are of COVID-19 dominating every aspect of our lives.

Truth is, though, there is news every day, usually every hour, that our communities need to know in order to make decisions with their families on how to protect their health, find services or help their neighbors.

That’s why newspapers are an essential service. We have remained at work this past week — armed with disinfectant and social distancing — sourcing and delivering local news, business information and answering your questions.

Our press and distribution facility prints and prepares not just The Astorian, but 10 other weekly newspapers that also need to get to their communities in Long Beach, Washington; Seaside; Warrenton; Cannon Beach and Manzanita; Tillamook; Lincoln City; Clatskanie; St. Helens and Wahkiakum, Washington.

Local news matters.

You need to know that we plan to keep printing these newspapers as long as we are not mandated to close. Our postmasters are prepared to deliver these newspapers for as long as they are allowed. “Until

they tell me I can’t,” said Astoria postmaster Philip Padfield.

We’re in this together.

But as the events of the past week have shown us, sometimes that decision will not be ours to make. Your subscription to The Astorian includes free digital access to our website — dailyastorian.com — and our e-edition, the online replica of our printed edition. You can also access both of those digital news sites through our breaking news and e-edition apps on your smartphone.

But you need to sign up to get access to those features. We’ve produced a help video on our dailyastorian.com/subscribe-now page to help you register, or call us at 800-781-3214. A live person will answer the phone and answer your questions so that you can get complete access online. Take the step to register online to be sure that you will always have access to local news at dailyastorian.com.

Especially in times of uncertainty, local news matters. That’s why we’ve announced a news partnership with Coast Community Radio to share content and resources in print, on air and online to provide up-to-date, accurate, vetted and credible information. KMUN will read our stories on air, and we’ll host the six-minute KMUN local news program on our website dailyastorian.com. They’ll share stories at



Kari Borgen, the publisher of The Astorian, and Graham Nystrom, the station manager at Coast Community Radio, have agreed to a news partnership on coronavirus coverage.

coastradio.org. Teamwork works.

You’ll find online and in print a grid listing local businesses that are open, their hours and services during the government restrictions. We’re providing the listings free to any business who needs to get the word out that they’re open for business. Please patronize them. We all need to do what we can to support one another as so many in Clatsop County will be faced with reduced income.

Speaking of reduced income, as our advertising dollars shrink with every event

cancellation, we appreciate the continued support of our subscribers and advertisers who believe as we do that local news matters. If you’re not subscribing or advertising, I hope you’ll consider it.

Starting Monday, our office will be closed to the public except by appointment. We are still available to help you. Call us at 503-325-3211 to talk to us or make an appointment, look for our contact information at dailyastorian.com, or email me at kborgen@dailyastorian.com.

Kari Borgen is publisher of The Astorian.



KARI BORGEN