



May 21, 2020

From: Tricia Mortell, RD, MPH, Washington County Public Health Division Manager

Re: COVID-19 Community Impacts in Washington County

Dear Chair Salinas and members of the House Interim Committee on Health Care

Thank you for this opportunity to share information about the impact of COVID-19 in Washington County. We are concerned about how this disease is affecting all community members, but we are particularly troubled by the disparate impact COVID is having on our Latinx community as well as other communities of color.

In our County, 17 % percent of our community members are Hispanic, but [50 percent of people](#) who've tested positive are Hispanic. We know this because of the hard work our contact tracing and case investigation teams are doing to gather RealD information during their interviews with people who've tested positive. We were the first county in the state to identify a COVID case at the end of February, and the first county [to announce this](#) demographic data in a [press conference](#) at the end of April.

At that time, we started to identify some of the factors driving this trend — we learned that nearly 60 percent of our Latinx residents who tested positive for COVID-19 work in industries that are considered essential including health care, construction, landscaping, farming, factories, grocery stores and food service. These community members keep our economy running and keep the rest of us safe—they don't have the privilege of working from home.

But this disparity is not just about the current situation. It is the result of systemic social, economic and health inequities that many in our community face every day. These inequities are not new, but the pandemic brings them into even sharper focus.

Although we have taken many actions to address these inequities during our pandemic response, we have much more to do at the county and state level. I am happy to share highlights of our efforts so far and our plans for the future.

Washington County's response to communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19

Equity efforts

The Washington County Board of Commissioners passed its first ever [equity resolution](#) and the Board is committed to achieving racial equity in our work. Because of this commitment, we created an Equity Officer position as part of our Emergency Operations Center leadership team. The Equity Officer is instrumental in implementing equity into decision making, uplifting equity considerations for emergency operations, developing a communication strategy, and convening culturally specific organizations to coordinate community engagement and education. While we are committed to equity in our emergency response, it's important to emphasize that equity is *always* a public health priority and a key focus of our Public Health modernization efforts.

Basic needs support

We learned early on in this pandemic that many of our community members impacted by this disease did not have adequate resources to quarantine at home, so we quickly worked with our community partners to put into place systems to provide food and other basic needs support. We expect this need to increase as we move into Phase I, so we are adding more staff and systems to meet these increased needs.

Targeted outreach

We developed a targeted outreach and education campaign through Spanish-language radio, weekly e-mail communications with our community partners, and social media posts and information in many languages. We have weekly calls with our community-based organizations and help to facilitate Facebook Live interviews hosted by the [Vision Action Network](#). We are also hiring contract firms to create culturally appropriate paid and earned social media campaigns as we move into Phase I of reopening.

Migrant and agricultural workers

We are reaching out to migrant farm and agricultural workers as well as owners and operators to ask about their need for supplies such as cleaning products, food, and face coverings. With Tuality Salud and Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, we developed a self-assessment tool that owners and growers use to determine changes they can make in their housing and field operations to mitigate disease spread. We also put together a plan to provide on-site testing in the case of an outbreak. Through these efforts we determined that additional face coverings would be helpful, so we prioritized ordering face coverings for these businesses. Our team is continuing this work as we expect several thousand migrant and agriculture workers to start working and living in our community in the next few weeks.

Respite shelter

We leased hotel space to provide temporary housing for people who test positive for COVID-19 and who need to be isolated but have nowhere else to recover. We have separate areas for people who've tested positive and those who are awaiting test results. We have housed several individuals who were houseless and unstably housed, but this facility will also be available for migrant farm workers and those being released from jail who need alternative housing due to the illness.

Business technical assistance

Our public health disease staff is working with businesses and organizations at highest risk for disease spread and serious illness such as long-term care facilities, other congregate care settings, and jails. We are also focusing on businesses that employ low-income workers and have difficulties with physical distancing standards.

Essential needs hubs

Our community services branch and the liaison staff in the Emergency Operations Center is working with cities to create and set up essential needs hubs where community members can get food, face coverings, and other essential items like diapers and toiletries.

Four-pronged equity approach

As we continue our current efforts and expand into Phase I reopening, we have an equity approach guided by four principles.

1. *Centering racial equity*

This means that we will continue to prioritize our efforts and work to:

- collect and use disaggregated data
- plan for the most vulnerable
- implement race-conscious approaches to counter persistent racial inequities

2. *Supporting people impacted by inequities*

We are working on contracts with multiple community-based organizations that provide services to communities of color. Each organization is working with us to determine how they can help support basic needs such as food, rent, and utilities. Social services support for families in quarantine and ongoing education to community members are also key components of this effort

3. *Protecting and expanding community voice*

We have regularly hosted conversations with community organizations and asked for information from them regarding community needs, available community resources and gaps. We will continue this work and make this a part of financial contracts going forward.

4. *Building an equitable economy*

On April 15, Washington County announced a new grant and loan program for small businesses adversely impacted by the pandemic. We prioritized applications from businesses who have historically faced a systemic lack of access to banking resources. We received and processed loans in several different languages.

As Oregon moves through the next phases of disease mitigation, harm reduction and recovery we ask that the State Legislature ensure enough funding for the Public Health System to conduct case investigation, contact notifications and monitoring and disease surveillance. But none of that public health work will keep communities safe from disease spread if those needing to isolate and quarantine do not have basic resources to remain at home. We need a State funding strategy for basic needs support or a financial COVID-19 isolation and quarantine payment to families in need, with a focus on communities of color who are impacted by higher rates of disease and by higher rates of job losses and financial insecurity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share this information about what we in Washington County are doing to mitigate ethnic, economic, social and health disparities during this pandemic and beyond. We look forward to continuing partnerships with our culturally specific community-based organizations to reduce these disparities moving forward.

Sincerely,



Tricia Mortell, RD, MPH
Public Health Division Manager