



Yakima Health District

Media Release

For immediate release: March 11, 2021

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COVID-19: One-Year Later in Yakima County

YAKIMA, WA- On March 11, 2020 the Yakima Health District (YHD) was informed by the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) that two Yakima County residents had tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. In the year since those initial cases, Yakima County has had 28,118 confirmed COVID-19 cases, 1,419 hospitalizations, and 385 deaths due to COVID-19.

The spread of an infectious virus like COVID-19 required every single community member to alter their life in some way. Over the last year, the Yakima Health District has had to work diligently, along with many committed partners, to ensure that community members were safe, that hospitals would not be overrun, and a community with primarily essential workforce, could stay safe.

What follows is an overview of the work taken on by the Yakima Health District. In the coming weeks additional information will follow with more specific information on initiatives taken on by our partners.

Funding Received and New Staff Hired

In a “normal year” the Yakima Health District operates on a \$6.2-million budget with 31 full time equivalent staff. On a day-to-day basis, most staff work on essential public health services such as environmental health, vital records, and communicable disease. To respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, YHD immediately required additional funding and staff.

As of 3/10/21 the Yakima Health District can document at least:

- **\$2,674,221** spent on COVID-19
- **24,892** hours of YHD staff-time spent on COVID-19 (not including subcontracted work)
- **109** individuals worked on behalf of the Yakima Health District on COVID-19 response
 - o Hired **11** additional staff within the Yakima Health District
 - o Partnered with **5** organizations that hired an additional **67** staff to support the COVID-19 response

Provider and Partner Communications

During the first few weeks of the pandemic, the Incident Management Team¹ at the Yakima Health District fielded calls 24 hours a day, 7 days a week as every provider, local government official, business owner, school administrator and community member in Yakima County tried to make sense of this new, evolving, virus. Provider and partner communications were vital to relay the most accurate, up to date information. In some days, information that was provided in the morning, was obsolete just a few hours later. During the last year, in addition to messaging medical guidance, the Yakima Health District has met

¹ Incident Management Team is comprised of the Executive Director, Health Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Director of Disease Control, Director of Public Health Partnerships, Local Emergency Response Coordinator, Director of Environmental Health and Senior Finance Officer.



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frequently with other local partners to keep them informed on the evolving COVID-19 guidelines from the federal government and state.

- **28** COVID-19 related alerts disseminated to all medical providers across Yakima County
- At least **31** weekly meetings with school nurses
- At least **40** weekly meetings with superintendents
- At least **50** meetings with local government officials via the Yakima Valley Council of Local Governments
- At least **56** meetings with local businesses via the Safe Start Taskforce

Personal Protective Equipment

At the onset of the response, the Yakima Health District partnered with the Yakima Valley Office of Emergency Management (YVOEM) to ensure all necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) was distributed to everyone in the front lines of COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, PPE was limited and various community-based groups throughout the community contributed by making cloth masks to help providers who did not have access to surgical masks or N95s. Over time, these cloth masks were distributed to the essential workforce as well. Now, there is sufficient PPE available for all healthcare providers and community members to stay safe while in public. Mask giveaways continue to be observed throughout the community.

The following has been distributed throughout Yakima County:

- 3,251,262 masks
- 4,680,400 gloves
- 435,725 gowns
- 37,079 face shields, safety glasses & goggles
- 6,416 containers of sanitizer
- 20 portable ventilators
- 3,905 other resources

This was distributed to over 300 partners across Yakima County and a total of 10,247 hours from YVOEM and volunteers were spent on this effort.

Testing and Testing Sites

Initially, with limited testing supplies and frequently changing guidelines, there were many barriers to access COVID-19 testing. For this reason, the Yakima Health District worked with State Fair Park, Pacific Northwest University, the Washington State National Guard and Medical Teams International to ensure ongoing community-based testing sites since April 2020. In May 2020, Signal Health received funding from DOH to establish a call center to provide results to every individual who tested at the community-based testing sites. At the end of October 2020, YHD again partnered with Signal Health to open the first permanent COVID-19 community-based testing site opened at the Yakima State Fair Park. Additionally, at the beginning of December 2020 a second community-based testing opened in Sunnyside at the Sunnyside Community Center through a partnership with Comprehensive Healthcare. Currently, between both sites, there is opportunity for testing seven days a week and care coordination services to support individuals as they isolate or quarantine while they wait for their test results.



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Yakima Health District corresponded with the State Health Laboratory and other private laboratories for COVID-19 testing and coordinated courier services for specimen transport. A daily drop off site for providers to ship lab tests to laboratories was set up at the YVOEM location and is now at YHD.

As of 3/8/21, the number of tests conducted:

- **48,122** tests collected by community-based testing sites
- **59,687** of calls made by the call center
- **9** staff hired to work at the call center since May 2020
- **25** staff hired to work at the Yakima and Sunnyside Community Based Testing sites

As of 3/8/21, the number of care coordination services provided at the community-based testing site

- **1,058** food boxes
- **223** at home testing kits
- **2,561** care kits distributed

Outbreak Response

The first outbreaks identified in Yakima occurred at long-term care facilities. At this time, YHD partnered with the DOH and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to go on-site to these facilities to monitor the situation. Through this experience, YHD, DOH and CDC developed best practices to contain the outbreaks at the long-term care facilities. Shortly after, outbreaks were observed in large agriculture workplaces. With the outbreak response at long-term care facilities having set precedence, YHD was able to quickly mobilize a team to respond to the quickly growing issue. YHD partnered with the Yakima County Development Association, Washington State Department of Labor & Industries, and the Washington Tree Fruit Association to create an outbreak response team. This team went on-site to the locations of the outbreaks to provide resources, education and guidance on how to stop the spread of COVID-19. Now, with funding from DOH, an Outbreak Response Team made up of eight staff members has units that focus on critical areas where outbreaks have previously been observed. Apart from this, the outbreak team also engages with the community, businesses, and schools for outbreak prevention. It is important to note that YHD was the first health department in Washington state to implement a response team like this.

- **8** number of staff
- **141** number of site visits to long term care facilities, schools, ag/warehouse, and other locations
- **69** outbreaks at long term care, schools, ag/warehouse, and other locations

Data Reporting and Case Investigation

The Yakima Health District has provided daily case updates for the last year. Along with the Washington State Department of Health data, the Yakima Health District has maintained its own log of the COVID-19 cases to ensure timely reporting to the public. This work includes checking faxes, processing the labs, uploading information both into the Washington Disease Reporting System and the Yakima Health District log, cross-referencing potentially duplicate results, running summary statistics, and posting onto the website almost every day for the last year.

On March 12, 2020, the Yakima Health District worked with the Washington State Department of Health to establish a partnership that handed off case investigation and contact tracing to DOH. There was not



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enough staff at the Yakima Health District to effectively investigate each case of COVID-19 with over 200 cases documented in the first three weeks alone. In November 2020, the Yakima Health District received additional funding from DOH to allow for case investigation to be conducted locally.

- At least **17,000** case investigation interviews conducted since March 2020
- **8** local case investigators hired in November 2020 to conduct case investigations
- **2** full time employee equivalent staff dedicated to COVID-19 data reporting

Communications and Outreach Efforts

In March 2020, the Yakima Health District had limited external communications. The Yakima Health District staff worked with partners at Yakima County, Yakima Public Access Channel (YPAC) and YVOEM to build social media content, learn website development and navigate media relations. Now, the Yakima Health District has 3 full-time equivalent staff working on communications. YHD created a new permanent position, Communications Specialist, that was filled in February 2021. YHD also hired an additional employee to answer phone calls from the public, full-time.

- **56** live COVID-19 updates since March 2020 in partnership with YPAC and directly on Facebook Live
- **95** media releases with information of public significance
- **3,000%** increase in social media followers
- At least **260** interviews with local, state, and national media
- **\$332,705** on **14** communication campaigns related to COVID-19 prevention, Community Masking, COVID-19 Testing, COVID-19 Vaccine

COVID-19 Vaccine Roll-Out

On December 14, 2020, Yakima County received its first shipment of COVID-19 vaccines. Every week since then, Yakima County has continued to receive an allocation of both Moderna and Pfizer vaccines. Additionally, now that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was recently approved, the Yakima Health District anticipates receiving increase amounts of this third vaccine as well. YHD has worked with local hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies to vaccinate eligible individuals as quickly as possible. YHD hopes to receive enough vaccine to open up a mass vaccine site at the State Fair Park Fairgrounds, following the successful model of community-based testing.

As of 3/10/21

- **68,880** of vaccines received
- **50,075** of vaccines administered
- **33,448** of individuals vaccinated

Conclusion

While Yakima County has reached its one-year mark since COVID-19, the Yakima Health District has continued to adapt in their response to COVID-19 as more information and more resources have become available. Additionally, the Yakima Health District has formed stronger partnerships with several community partners who have also played a significant role in slowing the spread of COVID-19. Yakima County went from one of the worst counties with COVID-19 activity, to a model of what could be accomplished when everyone works together. This would not have been possible without the many committed partners who committed their time to the safety of the community. Throughout, the following



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weeks, the Yakima Health District will be highlighting some of these partners' work and accomplishments from the past year.

QUOTES

“Today marks one year since the first cases of COVID-19 were documented in Yakima County. Since then, we have reported more than 28,000 cases and have tragically lost more than 300 lives due to COVID-19. Over the past year, we have asked the community to help combat the spread of the virus by wearing masks, practicing social distancing, getting tested, and now, by getting vaccinated. We want to take a moment to thank everyone for doing their part to help keep our community safe. We would also like to thank our hospitals, clinics, and community partners who have worked tirelessly during this pandemic to protect our community. At the Yakima Health District, we will continue to work diligently to ensure the safety of all Yakima County residents” Andre Fresco, Executive Director, Yakima Health District

“After an entire year of COVID-19, many people are exhausted. Now, with the arrival of the vaccine, we are all hopeful that this pandemic can end sooner rather than later. While there are so many reasons to celebrate how far we've come, and all we've overcome, we must remember that it is still critically important to follow the public health recommendations until the pandemic is under control. Thank you for continuing to remain vigilant and follow public health recommendations.” Dr. Larry Jecha, Interim Health Officer, Yakima Health District