

COVID-19 Press Conference Transcript
March 12, 2020

Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Good afternoon. Thank you for being here with us today on such short notice.

My name is Jennifer Lyall and I am the Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government.

County Executive Alan McCarthy requested this news conference today to provide open and transparent communication with the citizens of Cecil County, as we all work through the coronavirus pandemic.

The County Executive is graciously supported by leadership from local agencies. Today, we have with us:

1. Health Officer Ms. Lauren Levy, of the Cecil County Health Department
2. Director of Emergency Services for Cecil County, Chief Richard Brooks
3. Sheriff Scott Adams of the Cecil County Sheriff's Office
4. Superintendent for Cecil County Public Schools Dr. Jeffery Lawson and
5. Director of Administration for Cecil County Government Mr. Al Wein

In just a moment, County Executive McCarthy will provide a statement and then we will then open up the conversation for questions for the county executive and the panel.

Going forward, we will continue to work with the media to provide local updates as they occur in the form of news conferences, press releases and statements on our website and social media accounts.

And with that, I present to you the honorable Cecil County Executive Dr. Alan McCarthy.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Thank you very much, Jennifer.

Good afternoon. I appreciate teach of you in the media for being here today.

If you are watching online, I thank you for taking a few minutes to listen.

Before I go any further, I want to address an incident which occurred earlier this morning.

First, while Cecil County does not currently have a confirmed case of COVID-19, our citizens are not without risk.

However, as a precautionary measure, earlier today, Cecil Manor Elementary School was closed.

Dr. Lawson will provide more information about that situation in a few moments.

As we are all aware, the world is currently being impacted by the Novel Coronavirus, otherwise known as COVID-19.

Yesterday, the World Health Organization declared the Novel Coronavirus a global pandemic.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to monitor the outbreak of this respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus, which was first identified in Wuhan, China.

Cases of COVID-19 are being reported in a growing number of countries internationally, including the United States.

Our Governor Hogan relayed to us earlier this week that there have been confirmed cases of the virus in Maryland.

As of today, there are 12 reported cases in Maryland. It is encroaching on our County and our citizens.

Three weeks ago, I initiated the formation of the COVID-19 Task Force for Cecil County, led by our Health Officer, Lauren Levy, and supported by Chief Richard Brooks, Director of Emergency Services for Cecil County.

The COVID-19 Task Force is also made up of 35 leaders from:

- the Health Department
- Sheriff's Office and the Detention Center
- Emergency Services
- Public Schools and Cecil College
- Public Libraries
- Circuit Court
- Social Services
- Union Hospital and West Cecil Health Center
- as well as the Election Office
- Our local municipalities
- And various departments within Cecil County Government

At this time, we are in a prevention phase of this pandemic – limiting the spread of virus is key to preventing this illness.

Practicing good, personal hygiene is the best way to stop the spread of this disease.

Our health officer has advised us to take these simple steps:

1. Wash Hands with soap & water for at least 20 seconds.
2. Avoid contact with sick people and employ Social Distancing practices.
3. Sanitize frequently touched surfaces if you are sick, please stay home and avoid contact with the public.

I would like to stress this, please avoid contact with the public if you do not feel well.

4. Use a tissue or your elbow to cover coughs and sneezes.

5. Keep your hands down and away from eyes, nose and mouth.

If you have a fever, with or without respiratory symptoms such as a cough, shortness of breath, you are advised to stay home and avoid contact with others for the duration of your illness, and for 24 hours after symptoms abate.

The Cecil County Public Schools system is well ahead of the curve and is taking precautionary actions should this illness become a major factor.

As we look to the future, we know that decisions are going to have to be made about how we gather together as a community.

We know that our schools and our college may be impacted. I can assure you that these decisions will be made at the highest level with the support of science, and in the interest of the safety of all of our citizens.

Updates specific to Cecil County will be posted on both the County's website and the Health Department's website also.

Continue to learn more about the Novel Coronavirus, by visiting the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Maryland Department of Health websites.

Today, I felt that it was vitally important to keep everyone in our community informed.

Again, I encourage you to monitor the related websites to stay aware of the ever-changing conditions associated with this virus.

I assure you that we will continue to provide our citizens with the latest information with periodic updates.

Our task force is preparing for every situation that this pandemic could present to Cecil County.

This press conference today is to keep the citizens of Cecil County informed that we are preparing for the worst-case scenario.

Our intent is not to panic, but rather to prepare and prevent.

We will continue to work closely with all agencies to ensure that Cecil County remains as healthy as possible.

Thank you very much and now I'd like to turn it over to Dr. Lawson, Superintendent of Public Schools.

Dr. Jeffery Lawson - Superintendent for Cecil County Public Schools:

Thank you, Dr. McCarthy.

Real quickly before I start, I just want to acknowledge a thing, the different folks behind me: Emergency Services, the Health Department, police, everybody has been extraordinarily cooperative and helpful to us.

This morning, a parent came into the main office of Cecil Manor Elementary School exhibiting symptoms of respiratory illness. In an effort to exercise an abundance of caution, Cecil Manor dismissed all students this morning at 11:45 a.m. to allow for time for the building to be cleaned, particularly the office area. At this time, we anticipate that school will be open tomorrow.

And, as a quick note of thanks, the staff at Cecil Manor Elementary School as well as our maintenance department for Cecil County Public Schools, the maintenance folks were at the building within minutes to completely disinfect and clean the main office complex, the library as well as the principal's office, where the parent spent some time. It was a dismissal. It was turned around pretty quickly. And again, special thanks to the teachers and staff at Cecil Manor Elementary School.

Additionally, it was reported to us that students in several schools had attended a church youth group thing and were notified several days later that one of the youth leaders had been in contact with someone who reportedly tested positive for COVID-19. It is important to know that at no point did these students or their families come in contact with the individual reporting a positive diagnosis. These students have been advised to remain at home as a precautionary measure.

Our schools go through daily cleaning and disinfecting. We've been and are in contact with the county Health Department and Emergency Services as we work through each of these issues one at a time. Also, worth noting is Kelly Keeton, our Public Information Officer, each day will be posting, at the end of the day, a summary of the different instances that have occurred and our response during this time period while we are in this crisis. Again, so I would ask the community, our staff, to check our Facebook page at the end of each day and we will summarize the different instances that we have worked through as the day concludes.

Thank you.

Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

We will gladly accept questions from the media if you have any.

Please, go ahead.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Yeah, Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times. Let me direct this to Mr. Brooks. Governor Hogan reported yesterday that there was an incident in Montgomery County. A volunteer first responder, who actually lived in Virginia, but was participating at a station in Montgomery County, and that person had tested positive. They immediately took steps to disinfect that station.

I am wondering, especially since you deal with first responders that are volunteers in our fire companies and basic life support ambulances, what provisions are being made for example, disinfecting of the volunteers' ambulances, providing protective gear to the volunteers and any further coordination? Also, since they are not paid County employees, they are volunteers, whether they have health insurance or not, may be an individual matter. Is there any provision being made that the county might facilitate or pay for testing of the volunteer first responders?

Chief Richard Brooks - Director of Emergency Services for Cecil County:

Right. Make sure I answer all your questions. So, let's start with your first question of them having the information required and if people online have not heard this, the question is, you know, "what are we doing to make sure our volunteer first responders are prepared?"

Last night this room was full with our volunteer EMS officers at 6:00 pm. and our volunteer fire chiefs at 7:00 p.m. Each station, each chief officer, was given a packet by the Deputy Emergency Manager, Michelle Lloyd, that packet included the message that our Health Officer, Lauren Levy has brought forth to us since the beginning of this. It included the Hand Washing, so that they could post it in their signs, or post the signs in their station. It included an emergency preparedness kit for the individual member of the volunteer fire station, because they are no different then anyone else, we want them to be prepared.

We also spoke to the chiefs about procedures that they may choose to implement in their stations. Our volunteers are coming from all parts of life and different places where they work into the common place of the fire station and they may choose to put procedures in place about how the station is going to be entered.

As far as the insurance, certainly our first responders are an integral part of emergency services and in the case of addressing patients and being in the station, that is a Worker's Compensation issue that would cover that. We would certainly work with the first report of injury, if they had an exposure, and follow that up.

Is that everything you asked there, ma'am?

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Okay. I think I got most of it there.

Chief Richard Brooks - Director of Emergency Services for Cecil County:

Good deal.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

If I could ask, Dr. Levy a couple of questions on the testing process. The Maryland state laboratory was recently certified by the center for Disease Control as a laboratory to do the advanced testing...

Lauren Levy:

That's correct.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

If you could explain, what is the process if someone in Cecil County fears they might be exposed? What is the process? Should they go to their local physician should they contact the Health Department and what is the process then about getting things tested at the state lab?

Ms. Lauren Levy – Health Officer of the Cecil County Health Department:

Sure, so the state lab came online last week, but they also started shipping testing kits out to the commercial labs. So, testing kits are available through the commercial labs...

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

I'm sorry, I can't...

Ms. Lauren Levy – Health Officer of the Cecil County Health Department:

I'm sorry, let me pull this up a little bit.

Testing kits are available through commercial labs now in addition to the state. So, we are encouraging people who are experiencing symptoms to contact their primary care provider to make arrangements for testing. Those tests will then be transported to commercial labs. Once the tests are run, we receive the report with the results and then we would move forward.

As Dr. McCarthy noted, we do not have any confirmed cases yet, although several tests have been run on citizens of the county, but those have all been negative.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Okay, so if I could just follow it up. Guys I understand at LabQuest, excuse me, LabCorp and Quest Diagnostics have been authorized to testing on the private commercial basis, is there a provision or a legal provision or is it just guidance that if they get a positive that they are required to notify the local Health Department?

Ms. Lauren Levy – Health Officer of the Cecil County Health Department:

They are required to report it if they get a positive.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

What about people that perhaps don't have health insurance? I think the last numbers I saw were 7% of Cecil County residents lack health insurance. What if somebody doesn't have health insurance, they might not even have a primary care provider, what process would they use?

Ms. Lauren Levy – Health Officer of the Cecil County Health Department:

They should contact the Health Department at 410-996-5100. We have people on site who can help them with enrollment and help them with insurance, if need be.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Question for Dr. McCarthy.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Yes, ma'am.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Yesterday, Governor Hogan signed emergency legislation that was passed unanimously in the General Assembly authorizing him to transfer \$50 million from the state's rainy-day fund in order to pay for necessary emergency response to the Coronavirus. In Cecil County, in addition to the rainy-day fund, we have the budget re-assignment account and I'm probably using the wrong term.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Budget stabilization.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Budget stabilization, right. At this time, given that there is a process that is used - the County Council has to approve re-allocations of those funds and on their time frame it can take a month, or if it is an emergency, I guess maybe two weeks. Is there any thinking at this time that perhaps, since this virus situation is moving so quickly, that you might ask the County Council to approve a tapping of funds from the budget re-assignment account in advance then perhaps with limitations that it would only be used for the Health Department or Emergency Services? So that the money is there in case there is a crisis.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Well, you are certainly quite right in what you are suggesting. At this particular point in time, there is no specific need for additional funds for Cecil County Government, but in view of what is going on and the rate at which this is moving, yes, if necessary, we would use the budget stabilization funds and possibly even the emergency funds, if necessary.

That is one of the reasons it is so important that we increase the value or the amount of money in these funds moving forward, because this is something I don't imagine anyone anticipated happening to the degree and speed to which it has occurred.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Do you think, if it becomes necessary, since this is moving so quickly, that there would be ample time for the Council to respond?

Dr. Alan McCarthy:

I trust that we could do this under emergency conditions. I am hoping that it does not come to that, but I trust that the Council will basically recognize the gravity of this situation and certainly move forth with to get the monies available.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Because, Dr. Lawson, could I ask you quick question?

Dr. Jeffery Lawson - Superintendent for Cecil County Public Schools:

Yes, ma'am.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

At this point, you mentioned the incident today, and on any given day I can imagine, most kids, especially young kids, are sniffing or coughing for one reason or another. Is there any kind of a process being contemplated or discussed that perhaps school nurses would make the rounds of the classrooms and try to evaluate children during the day?

Dr. Jeffery Lawson - Superintendent for Cecil County Public Schools:

As of now, that has not been discussed. What I can tell you is that the schools nurses are on the front line. They are the very first people, that whether its teachers or administrators, in the school buildings, they are the very first people that are tapped in regards to access. At the same time, kind of behind the scenes, through our Student Services division, we reach out to the Health Department for guidance and really we are relying on those two sets of expertise, if you will, to guide us. This is imperfect, to be very honest with you and we are dealing with three to five potential issues today that we didn't know were going to arise at 8:00 a.m. this morning. And so, that is where we are right now.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Could you elaborate on the three to five? You mentioned one school.

Dr. Jeffery Lawson - Superintendent for Cecil County Public Schools:

Well, the church, the youth group, that I had mentioned, students represent multiple schools in that one incident. And so to each principal, to each staff of the school, you know that is their issue, so to speak. And they reach out to us separately, but the youth group encompasses, I want to say, six different schools.

And again, we will put out information. You know, I have a conference call scheduled with the state's superintendents, with Dr. Salmon, the State Superintendent, at 5:00 p.m. this evening and my hunch is that we will get further guidance on issues such as field trips, athletic events and those sorts of things.

Apparently, if folks haven't seen it, Governor Hogan has indicated that he expects to make a major announcement later this afternoon. So, certainly we will be watching that closely as well.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

Dr. McCarthy, question.

We are already seeing some changes in perhaps local quality of life in the county. Things that have been long-standing traditions. I just saw that the Earlville Daffodil event that is conducted every year, in advance of Easter time, and there is a field in Earlville, this has been going on for like 30 years, and people come from all over to gather the daffodils, put them into vases and bring them to the elderly and nursing homes, and bring them to Union Hospital. They just announced that with concerns of the virus, they are cancelling the event this year because they are afraid of possible harm or lack of access to the nursing homes or hospital patients.

Are we facing, at this point, sort of an erosion, maybe that's the wrong word, or a real change in basic traditions and quality of life that have made Cecil County very unique and how do people respond to that?

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

I'm really not certain, I'm glad you brought that up because I intended to attend tomorrow morning at 7:00 a.m. I have a full day tomorrow, but I see that the NCAA tournament will basically be without visitors. Professional basketball is being discontinued to a great degree. The Acela line has such few passengers, that they cease to use it. That goes from Washington to New York. Many of the airplanes are flying without passengers just to maintain their routes. The financial impact of what's going on now is going to be quite substantial.

I've looked at all of the different issues and this is truly one of the cascading events where it gets far worse as you go further down the stream.

I hope that this will be a very short-lived event. I hope it is not nearly as traumatic to society as what the pundits seem to think it might be and I hope that it basically goes by and passes over us very rapidly, because the dynamics of this are really catastrophic.

I have received calls from restaurateurs, who are canceling most of their events in the near term, and some of them are even going out two or three months. So, I hope that we can get a grip on this thing real, real quick.

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times:

And just one thing...oh...sorry.

Chief Richard Brooks - Director of Emergency Services for Cecil County:

I'm gonna respond to you in the spirit that you asked, and I am going to say that we are in a pause. And we are in a pause for good reason.

Cecil County has no active cases at this time. I admit that that can change in 5 minutes or tomorrow or in the future, but the fact is, we have no active cases. So, what we are doing is we are preparing and we are preventing and if preventing means that we are going to postpone activities, and that activity might be next time the daffodils bloom, then so be it.

I had a conversation today with our Director of Community Services, Dave Trolio, we talked about suspending the Senior Center. Who are we protecting? The most vulnerable population, our seniors. Right, but we are going to assure, under his direction, that if critical meals are needed, that we do that, and a plan has been developed. As it has for the school children.

So, that might be in a pause. Whatever has to be done to create distance between contamination, we are going to use those good ideas, they will become the best practices. I think one of the most important things that we all need to keep in mind, never in the lifetime of anybody in this room, have we seen this type of an event begin to develop.

So, we plan for it and we plan our actions carefully, so that we can protect our citizens. We are successful right now. Right? If we get active cases, it does not mean we are unsuccessful, we've stayed it off and we will continue to create that distance.

Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

We'll take one more question.

Jacqueline Covey, Cecil Whig:

Yes, I just wanted to touch on...sorry, I came in late, so I'm in the back.

I'm Jacqueline from the Cecil Whig. I just wanted to touch on what...in all of your departments is there any outreach to the homeless community at all? Like ensuring that they are keeping clean and not interacting with potential, you know...

Chief Richard Brooks - Director of Emergency Services for Cecil County:

That's an excellent question. Many of our advocates in the homeless community, one of, let me touch on one of the areas. We are currently, as we speak, looking at extended care and anticipating that we might have over capacity of our healthcare facilities and looking at how we will take care of those people. Included in that is our homeless population, because if they are impacted in their communities and they are ill, we are going to need to bring them into the standard healthcare community.

So, yes. That is actively being looked at.

Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

I'd like to thank you all for coming today. If you have any other questions, I will provide my e-mail address. You can ask, call, you all know how to get ahold of me and we will go from there.

Thank you.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Thank you very much for attending.

(End of press conference)

Transcribed: March 12, 2020
By: Rebekah Corle