

COVID-19 Update Press Conference Transcript
May 15, 2020

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us on this beautiful day in Cecil County.

My name is Jennifer Lyall and I am your Public Information Officer.

County Executive Alan McCarthy requested this press conference today so that he and Health Officer Lauren Levy can provide an update on plans to reopen Cecil County.

In just a moment, the County Executive will give his remarks, followed by a statement by Ms. Levy.

Questions from the media will be entertained at the conclusion of the press conference.

Any other questions may be directed to my email: pio@ccgov.org.

With that, County Executive Alan McCarthy...

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Good afternoon.

Today is a good day in Cecil County. Thanks to our citizens' attention to detail in following all the appropriate and prescribed hygiene protocols, Cecil County is ready to begin our reopening.

This past Wednesday, May 13th, Governor Hogan released *Order of the Governor of the State of Maryland, Number 20-05-13-1*.

His order will allow the reopening of certain businesses and facilities previously closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

While Governor Hogan left the final decision to commence Phase I of the reopening with the top elected official in each Maryland county or Baltimore City, I am proud to announce that effective at 5:00 p.m. today we will implement all of the facets stipulated in his Order.

Stage One of the Governor's plan will be implemented with a flexible, community-based approach that empowers individual jurisdictions at the county level to make decisions regarding the timing of re-openings.

It is very important to note that while the county can be more restrictive than the state, we cannot remove restrictions that the Governor retains in place.

For example, in Stage One of Governor Hogan’s plan, he has NOT given the green light for restaurants to open.

Just like all of you, after being under a stay-at-home order for so long, I would love to be able to dine-in at our local restaurants, and more than anything, put those business owners, servers and workers back to work.

However, the Governor’s directives do not allow for that to happen. I cannot make decisions that remove restrictions that the Governor retains in place.

Today, I am very happy to report that I have absolutely no plans for Cecil County to be more restrictive in our plans for re-opening, but will be as accommodating as possible provided safety protocols are followed.

The entities previously closed, and now permitted to open, are:

Religious Facilities – Must wear protective face masks, practice social distancing and limit participants to 50% of the facility rated capacity.

Retail Establishments – defined as those businesses *that principally sell goods*. Employees and customers must wear protective face masks, practice social distancing and limit customers to 50% of the normal clientele.

Manufacturing – attention to limit groups of employees, masks and social distancing.

Personal Services – (By appointment only)

Hair Salons

Barber Shops

Employees and customers must practice social distancing to the highest degree possible and wear protective face masks.

Approved Recreational Activities:

Golf courses

Outdoor archery and shooting ranges

Marinas & watercraft rental businesses

Campgrounds

Horse boarding and riding facilities.

In addition to those provisions each reopened business must follow, all must periodically sanitize areas touched by customers and employees as directed by the state and local mandates. Each of these newly opening businesses must comply with all State and applicable local orders and mandates issued by the local Health Officer.

It is my pleasure at this time to introduce Cecil County Health Officer, Lauren Levy. But first I must recognize and thank her and her staff for the exceptional direction and support of Cecil County during this pandemic.

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

Thank you, Dr. McCarthy.

The County Executive has noted that at 5:00 p.m. today Cecil County will begin implementing the Phase 1 reopening outlined in Governor Hogan's Executive Order. I know that this is welcomed news, but I want to be very clear that the threat presented by COVID-19 has not been eliminated.

We continue to see active community transmission of COVID-19 in the County. To date 316 Cecil County residents have tested positive and 19 members of our community have lost their lives to this disease. I do not want us to forget the very real toll that this has taken.

This is a critical juncture for the county, state and country. In order to ensure that we are able to maintain our progress in limiting the negative impact of the coronavirus and continue to move forward toward full reopening, we must all take responsible for adhering to social distancing guidelines and other recommendations.

I want to highlight a few important points. First, although the Stay-At-Home Order has been lifted, residents are encouraged to stay safer at home by continuing to travel only when necessary. Vulnerable residents, such as older adults and those with underlying health conditions, are strongly advised to continue staying at home as much as possible. If you have friends or neighbors that fall into that category, I urge you to reach out to them to see what support they may need.

All residents should continue to practice physical distancing, maintaining a distance of at least six feet from other people. We must continue wearing masks in indoor public areas, retail stores, on public transportation and other places where large groups of people congregate. Please continue to wash your hands often and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.

Gatherings of more than 10 people are still prohibited. Although the Governor has allowed an exception for religious observation, I encourage faith communities to remain vigilant, in order to protect their congregants. Recommendations for faith communities, including requiring face masks and instituting strict distancing policies, will be posted on the Health Department website.

The Health Department also advises against certain closed contact activities at this time such as the use of playgrounds and contact sports.

I encourage county businesses to review the recommended "Best Practices" that have been developed jointly by the Maryland Department of Health and the Department of Commerce. These documents provide valuable guidance to ensure that businesses protect their customers and their employees. Businesses and other organizations should feel free to contact the Health Department with any questions regarding how to reopen safely.

Our ability to move on to Phases 2 and 3 will be dependent on our success in adhering to these guidelines. Decisions to move forward or to reinstate restrictions will be based on an ongoing assessment of certain critical indicators. The so called "Stop Signs" outlined in the *Road Map to Recovery*. These include unexpected increases in hospitalizations, sustained increases in admissions to the intensive care unit, indications that residents are not adhering to physical distancing guidelines and significant outbreaks of community transmission.

As we have done since the beginning of our response effort, we will carefully monitor the situation and make decisions based on current data and the latest science. We will also continue to fortify the four building blocks outlined in the *Road Map to Recovery*: personal protective equipment, surge planning, testing and contact tracing.

The Health Department is ramping up its contact tracing efforts significantly to quickly identify potential clusters of cases and prevent further disease transmission. If you receive a call about contact tracing from the Health Department or one of partners, please take it seriously. This is an important public health tool to stop the spread of disease.

I want to thank you for your continued vigilance. If you have any questions about COVID-19 or are in need of assistance for resources, I encourage you to call the Health Department's COVID-19 call center at 410-996-1005. Thank you.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

While this is a time to celebrate, I remind you that it is but the first phase of a gradual reopening of all businesses in Cecil County. I must share my concern and caution to all of our citizens.

We have managed to reach this point by collectively battling disease. To reinforce the comments made by Ms. Levy, we must comply with state and local health protocols:

- Wear your protective mask when appropriate.
- Practice social distancing when out and about.
- Wash your hands regularly and try not to touch your face with your hands.

If we manage well, then the next phase will follow, opening our local economy even more. If we do not manage well, we will suffer a set-back that none of us wants.

So embrace the moment. Support your local businesses including those identified as essential who continue to serve.

Support the newly opening businesses and don't forget those still closed like our restaurants that are still providing curbside or carry out services.

As I have said many times, together we will conquer this pandemic.

I have full confidence that we will manage this phased reopening well and move forward allowing more businesses to open; therefore, moving us further along in our effort to get everyone back to work and our state and local economies on the mend.

Please keep in mind that we have families, friends and neighbors directly involved in COVID-19 through illness and, unfortunately, in some cases suffering from the loss of someone who succumbed to this cruel disease.

Thank you for your time this Friday afternoon.

Let's rejoice in this moment that we are moving towards a new normal, but do so cautiously and respectfully.

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

If there is anyone from the media who has a question, please go ahead.

Doug Donley – Cecil TV:

Yes.

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Go ahead, Doug.

Doug Donley – Cecil TV:

This is Doug Donley. The responsibility or decision making over opening the (unintelligible) from the state, the county, does Cecil County have all the expertise and resources it needs to make, to evaluate the situation and make the decision?

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

We do. We work very closely with our state and local partners to make determinations. We are working very closely with Union Hospital, working closely with the Department of Emergency Services. We all have different data sources that we are reviewing all the time to make sure that we are managing the response appropriately. We examined where we are in terms of the

"building blocks" before making the determination that we would go along with the full reopening rather than a more restrictive reopening.

Doug Donley – Cecil TV:

Thank you.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Nancy Schwerzler, Cecil Times.

I have a question for Ms. Levy. Governor Hogan ordered that all nursing homes in the state, staff and patients, must be tested and PPE must be worn by the staff at all times. Have all nursing homes in Cecil County now had all staff and residents tested?

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

Not yet. So, we had the outbreak at Calvert Manor, and all of those residents and staff have been tested at this point, but the National Guard is sending out Bridge Teams and they are to do full testing, point prevalence testing, single, point and time testing for all of the nursing homes. Yesterday, Elkton Nursing Rehab was tested and the other nursing homes are yet to be scheduled, but the National Guard Bridge Team's will be sent out to do the testing as required.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

How many more nursing homes or assisted living facilities still need to be tested?

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

Only the nursing homes are required to have the full testing and there are three nursing home facilities in the County so there are two remaining.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Two remaining. Okay.

Has the state provided PPE to the nursing home staffs as the Governor said would be accomplished?

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

Yes, we have been working closely. We are in regular communication with each of the nursing homes to access their PPE needs and we have been providing, the local health department along with distributions that have been provided by the state, we have been providing PPE as needed.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

So, all the nursing homes have all the PPE they need?

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

I check in with them regularly and they let us know and if they have any needs, then we send supplies over.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

The testing that is being done by the National Guard, is that using an expedited system or is that...you know...?

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

No, it is not.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

...No it's not? Okay.

So, just for the sake of time-frame, the tests that are done with the National Guard just yesterday, how long before you get results?

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

I think we are being told 48 to 72 hours.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Okay.

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

I would need to confirm that.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

I'm sorry, say again?

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

I would need to confirm that, but I believe it was 48 hours. 48 to 72 hours.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Okay. Another testing question.

The intensive testing initiative that was conducted last week in Southern Cecil County aimed at agricultural operations, how many people were tested?

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

Over 300. Close to 320.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

And have results come in?

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

Yes. And all of those people have been contacted and contact tracing is underway.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Are there any more agricultural facilities in Southern Cecil County that were not tested but are on the schedule to be tested?

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

We do not have a schedule testing event, but we are in discussions about the best way to proceed.

Agricultural workers from all the surrounding agricultural firms were invited to participate in that event.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Okay and in that event, was there assistance from the National Guard?

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

No, there was not.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

.... there was not? Okay. Was there special testing materials provided by the state or were you using your own resources provided by the county?

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

Union Hospital graciously provided the testing kits.

We also had supplements from the state as well.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Okay. One other testing question, the, uh, Governor Hogan has opened multiple VEIP, the emissions testing facilities operated by the State Motor-vehicles for drive-thru corona testing. All those facilities are on the Western Shore. Do you think it would assist Cecil County in getting necessary testing to have the State VEIP station in Cecil County open for drive-thru corona testing?

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

I think expanded access to testing is only a good thing. I do think that we have pretty good access right now for people who want to get tested, who have symptoms, can generally get tested. Union is operating their drive-thru operations 4 days a week. I don't think that they are at capacity. So, and my understanding that there are other providers who also have significant testing capacity, so while I think it would certainly be helpful for a VEIP location to open, I don't think that there is significant unmet need at this time.

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Thank you. I will open it up to whomever.

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Thank you. Is there any more questions from the media?

Washington Post Representative:

Yes, hello?

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Please go ahead.

Washington Post Representative:

I have a quick question. I wanted to ask the County Executive, he said at the beginning of the press conference that the County Executive cannot go any further than what the Governor allows in the Order. It sounded like, I wanted to find out whether he would have liked to have seen this to lift more restrictions, he mentioned restaurants, so I am curious about that?

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Well, and I certainly do have my own opinions, but the thing is I am willing to comply with the Governor's recommendations. He has vast resources that are not available to Cecil County so I am depending upon his fair application and prudent judgement when it comes to releasing these requirements. I hope that answered your question.

Washington Post Representative:

Yes, I was curious, you said you have your own opinion about whether....

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

In the case, one of the contentious areas is the restaurants, I think that certain restaurants that have outside dining capacity certainly have the space available to properly and functionally open it up in a safe and prudent manner.

Washington Post Representative:

Thank you.

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

You are welcome.

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Are there any other questions?

Nancy Schwerzler – Cecil Times:

Yeah, Jen, Nancy Schwerzler.

Dr. McCarthy, the impact of the virus on the budget, you instituted a budget and hiring freeze for the rest of the fiscal year, but yesterday the Board of Revenue Estimates in Annapolis significantly downgraded the impact of revenues in the calendar fiscal year although they say it could be very substantial in the upcoming year. The most interesting thing that the Board of Revenue Estimates said was that actually income tax payroll withholding payments actually increased in April despite job loss. Has Cecil County seen a similar trend so far that County residents have held onto their jobs and are continue to pay their withholding taxes?

Dr. Alan McCarthy – Cecil County Executive:

Well, I can't speak specifically to the withholding taxes now because there is a huge time delay because those taxes are paid to the state and they rebate the money to us, but I can proudly say that Cecil County has the lowest unemployment rate in the state of Maryland as we speak. We also have numerous jobs which are unfilled, so, many unemployed Cecil County residents can certainly look for places in Cecil County that are hiring right now. I do not anticipate our income revenues to be tremendously impacted.

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Okay, we will take one more question from the media.

Jacqueline Covey – Cecil Whig:

Hi, this is Jacqueline. My question is just with this slight sort of reopening order, are there any safe guards put in place like as far as more staff on staff during this time in case there is a surge?

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

So, staffing, we are increasing our staffing at the Health Department in order to handle contact tracing. We are relying on volunteers through Maryland Responds as well as some of the Cecil

County Public School nurses have graciously volunteered to help us with that effort. We are also exploring the possibility of some temporary hiring to support that effort.

In terms of surge planning, the staffing the state has, in collaboration with the Maryland Hospital Association, has developed the Chesapeake Registry and I understand that Union Hospital is registered with that in order to access additional staffing resources should they be needed.

Jacqueline Covey – Cecil Whig:

Thank you.

Ms. Jennifer Lyall – Public Information Officer for Cecil County Government:

Thank you so much for being with us today. The video and transcript of today's press conference will be on the County's website later this afternoon. Thank you so much and if you have any other questions, remember you can e-mail pio@ccgov.org. Thank you.

(End of Tape)

Transcribed: May 15, 2020
By: Rebekah Corle