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## MOMENT OF REFLECTION



Photo by Marcy Stamper

A solitary deer paused along the Methow River between Twisp and Carlton, watchful for anything else that might approach.

## Okanogan County closely monitors COVID-19 case uptick

### Concerns about relaxed rules, contact tracing

BY MARCY STAMPER

As people in Okanogan County and other counties throughout the state dip their toes into the sea of normalcy — and some wade in up to their waist — county and state health officials are carefully monitoring COVID-19 cases and the ability of hospitals to deal with a surge.

While Okanogan County has seen an uptick in confirmed cases in recent weeks, with the total nearly doubling in the past month, most cases occurred in an extended family and are not a community outbreak, Okanogan County Community Health Director Lauri Jones said at a Board of Health meeting last week. The cases are contained and Public Health is working with the families and their employers to be sure that people stay home and have food and other necessary resources.

With diligent contact tracing and currently adequate hospital capacity and COVID tests, Jones believes the county is on a good path to control the spread of the virus, although she remains nervous about cases that may have been transmitted over Memorial Day weekend. “The next worry is July 4,” she said.

### COUNTY CASE TALLY

Okanogan County had reported 74 cases of COVID-19 as of Friday (June 12), with eight new cases since the previous Friday.

Five are in the Methow Valley, 11 on the Colville Indian Reservation, 39 in the south county (Pateros to Malott), 14 in the central Valley (Malott to Riverside), and five in the north county (Riverside to Oroville).

Public Health provided a breakdown of the eight new cases by town. Two were in Tonasket, one in Omak, and five in Brewster.

Two people have died from the disease and 58 are recovering.

County Health Officer John McCarthy was less upbeat. McCarthy is still worried about potential infections from graduation events and increased activity during recent sunny weather. “Realistically, we need to have our eyes open. I expect cases, but we will be prepared to do contact tracing to control them,” he said.

Any viruses transmitted over Memorial Day weekend should have been detected by now, McCarthy said. “But my biggest concern is that asymptomatic people come here and think they feel great,” which could expose county residents, he said. “Others hopefully know to stay home.”

Schools around the county had to submit their graduation plans to Jones and McCarthy for approval. But after the events, Jones received worrying reports about instances where people weren't careful, she said.

As the growing season goes ramps up, the county is working closely with growers and employers to be sure all farmworkers are healthy and safe, Jones said. The United States and Mexican governments didn't test migrant workers arriving in this country to work on farms and orchards, leaving the task of monitoring them to the county and growers, she said.

COVID-19 transmission has continued to increase in eastern Washington since the end of May. The situation in eastern Washington is of greatest concern, particularly in Benton, Franklin, Spokane and Yakima counties, the Washington Department of Health (DOH) said in a statewide situation report released June 13.

Although many counties are seeing much lower rates of transmission, by population, those four counties are in a position comparable to King County at its COVID peak in March. The situation may require expanded hospital capacity and testing and additional steps to protect the people at highest risk, according to DOH.

Case counts had been trending flat in western Washington, but small increases are now being observed there as well, as businesses start to re-open and the governor's Stay Home order is relaxed, according to the report.

### Contact tracing

One of the tools public health

workers use to restart the economy and social activities is contact tracing of anyone who's tested positive for COVID-19 — or of anyone with COVID symptoms — so they can be quarantined during the incubation period to prevent them from potentially spreading the virus to others.

Contact tracing has gotten attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's not new — it's regularly used by public health workers to track food-borne outbreaks and contagious diseases, Jones said.

“As we want to move to different community-mitigation measures and move away from everyone staying home, we need to be able to have a system that can quickly identify folks who are COVID positive and basically get them to stay home, rather than the entire population,” Washington Secretary of Health John Wiesman said.

Because some people are suspicious of contact tracers and how the information they gather will be used, there have been threats to some public health workers, according to a discussion at the Board of Health meeting. In Okanogan County, because of its vast geography — and to keep everyone safe — Public Health staff and volunteers are contacting people by phone, not in person, Jones said. (See sidebar about contact-tracing scams.)

### Public Health needs money

Public Health badly needs additional funds to hire more employees to oversee the response to the pandemic, Jones told the Board of Health and county commissioners — not for the first time.

The commissioners have authorized using 25% of the county's funding from the federal CARES Act to increase capacity at Public Health, County Commissioner Chris Branch said. The county received more than \$2.3 million from the act.

“Jones and her staff are working very long hours — they're working their butts off. They're the ones who got us to Phase II,” McCarthy said. “It's more work than anyone can handle unless they're into martyrdom.”

“No matter what, Public Health will have to deal with this for a while,” Jones said.

## Contact tracing scams

Public health officials are warning people to be wary of contact-tracing scams.

### How the scams work

You receive an unsolicited message via text, email or social media that says you've come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19. The message includes a link to click for more information.

Don't click on the link — these links can contain malware that gets downloaded to your device.

Another scam involves a robo-call claiming to be part of “contact and tracing efforts.” The call

informs you that you've been exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19. After you choose to speak to a representative, the “contact tracer” asks you to verify personal information like name and date of birth — but also for financial accounts and other information that can be exploited, like government ID numbers.

### How to tell a real contact tracer from a scam

Okanogan County Public Health contact tracers start with a phone call, but they never ask for account or financial informa-

tion or government ID numbers. They won't send a link via text or email without first speaking with you first.

### Contact tracers will identify themselves

A legit call from Public Health starts with the tracer providing their name and identifying themselves as calling from Okanogan County Public Health. If you're uncertain that you're speaking with an official contact tracer, hang up and call Okanogan County Public Health at (509) 422-7158 to confirm before providing any information.