

The Northern Light

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Community Newspaper of Blaine and Birch Bay

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Federal grant to temporarily add \$300 a week to unemployment benefits

BY OLIVER LAZENBY

Those receiving unemployment benefits due to Covid-19 in Washington state will soon get some extra relief.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced on August 24 that it approved Washington for a grant that will provide an extra \$300 a week for three weeks to workers who have lost work due to the Covid-19 crisis and are receiving unemployment benefits. The grant is part of the agency's Lost Wages Assistance program.

On August 8, President Trump made available up to \$44 billion from FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund to provide financial assistance to Americans who have lost wages due to Covid-19, according to a FEMA news release on the program. Trump acted after Congress could not agree on a coronavirus relief package as other aid was expiring.

The benefit is currently limited to those who filed claims over a three-week period between July 26 and August 15, 2020, according to a press release from the Washington State Employment Security Department (ESD), which is administering the program. Eligible workers will receive back pay dating to the week ending August 1. Not everyone who has filed an unemployment claim will be eligible, according to ESD.

Suzi LeVine, ESD commissioner, said her agency estimated this grant would provide more than \$400 million to individuals in Washington state.

The extra \$300 a week is separate from the extra \$600 per week previously available to those receiving unemployment benefits. That additional \$600 was part of a federal CARES Act provision called the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, which expired at the end of July.

FEMA has approved Lost Wages Assistance grants to at least 28 other states so far.

To learn more about FEMA's lost wages supplemental payment assistance, go to: bit.ly/2FM4poK.

Temporary Point Roberts ferry arrives in Blaine



▲ Point Roberts residents unload at Blaine Harbor after catching the first ride on a temporary ferry the Port of Bellingham funded to allow Point Roberts residents to reach the mainland. See story on page 15.

Photo by Ruth Lauman

School service employees to be furloughed District signs agreement not to lay off employees before November

BY GRACE MCCARTHY

The Blaine school board voted unanimously to approve a letter of agreement between the district and a union representing school service employees that will furlough employees until October 31. Under this agreement, staff such as bus drivers, food service providers and paraeducators will keep their health insurance. Previously, service employees feared they would be laid off.

"This is not the ideal but given all the things that we know right now, it's where I think we can feel good about the sup-

port we've given our people," said Blaine school district superintendent Christopher Granger during the August 24 school board meeting.

This comes after an August 18 layoff announcement to union members from Blaine's Service Employees International Union 925 chapter. Local union representatives said they sent the letter after receiving the impression that the district would not budge with negotiations. Granger told *The Northern Light* in a previous article that the district believed it was still in negotiations at that time.

Union members protested in front of the

district's office on August 18 and wrote letters to the school board members. The day following the union's announcement, the board held a special meeting in executive session to discuss collective bargaining.

"I'm so happy that our efforts paid off," said Kim Ingham, a bus driver and food service worker who rallied at the district's office last week. "Everyone is happy they got a little more time with their medical."

Ingham said she's filing for unemployment after working with the district for 29 years. Although she describes the process

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Low-barrier Covid-19 tests available weekly in Birch Bay

BY OLIVER LAZENBY

Whatcom County's low-barrier Covid-19 mobile testing program expanded this week to include a site at Birch Bay Bible Community Church, as well as five other new locations throughout the county.

For the first day of the program at Birch Bay Bible Community Church, at 4660 Bay Road, the county health department and Whatcom Unified Command (WUC) performed tests between 9 a.m. and noon.

The program offers free testing and doesn't require insurance or a physician's referral. Tests are available by appointment only and can be scheduled online at TestDirectly.com/whatcom.

As of this week, the mobile testing program will have a stop inside the border of every school district in the county. Visit whatcomcounty.us/covidtesting for a list of test sites and times. The health department is running the program with WUC and volunteers.

Future test dates in Birch Bay are not yet scheduled, but health department officials said the program would continue with a similar schedule to the first week, meaning that testing in Birch Bay will likely continue every Tuesday. Test dates and registration will open weekly on Saturdays at testdirectly.com, health department director Erika Lautenbach said in an August 25 media briefing.

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as daunting, she said the district has eased the transition with quick communication.

Sue Schroeder, the Blaine union vice president, said the union is happy about the agreement and optimistic it can come to another agreement in mid-October.

The district and union will begin meeting before October 9 to discuss employment status after the October 31 agreement expires, according to the letter of agreement. If the district and union have not come to an agreement by October 15, the district can lay off employees on November 1.

The district is anticipating lower enrollment numbers for the 2020-21 school year that will decrease the district's funding from the state, which is already not enough to compensate all staff for their salaries, according to the agreement.

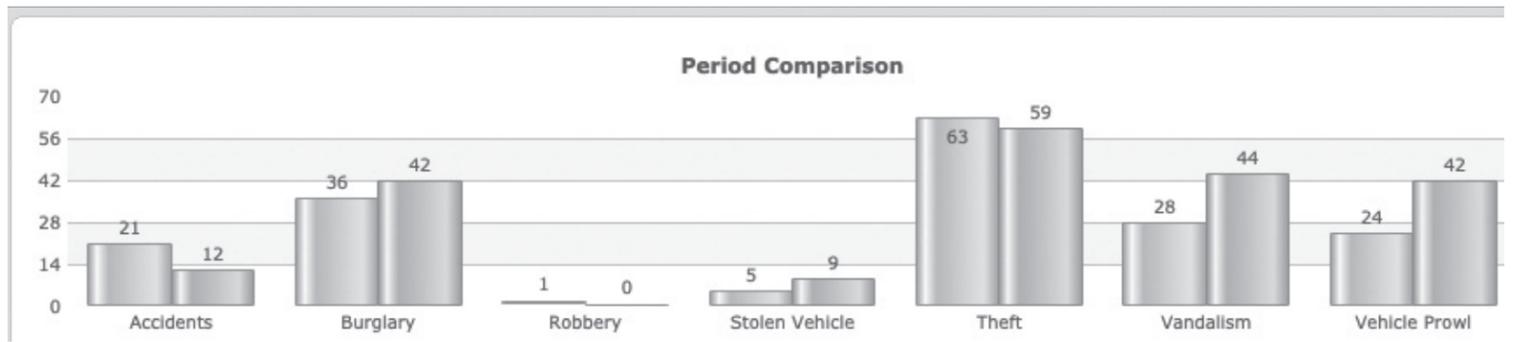
The district had previously adopted a hybrid plan that allowed district employees to continue their employment before the Whatcom County Health Department recommended schools start the year with remote learning.

Granger said during the board meeting that he hoped students could start returning to the school by the end of September or early October. The district plans to phase students in to the classroom, starting with those in special education and life skills programs, those experiencing homelessness and those without internet access.

The district will ask service employees to return to work by seniority, according to the agreement. Employees who are high risk for Covid-19 and senior employees can continue to volunteer for furlough as long as it's available.

"I think it's a good way to move forward and gives our people time to adjust and gives the district time to see how it's going to play out in the next couple of months," school board president Charles Gibson said. "It gives us the flexibility of being able to bring people back as needed as we move into hybrid education. That is our intent and has been our intent all along."

Sheriff's office's new crime dashboard shows increase in vandalism, burglaries in Birch Bay



▲ A screengrab from the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office's new data dashboard shows the change in rates for seven categories of incidents from this year to last year in Birch Bay.

Image courtesy of Whatcom County

BY GRACE MCCARTHY

The Whatcom County Sheriff's Office launched an interactive crime dashboard that organizes criminal activity in eight unincorporated areas of Whatcom County, including Birch Bay.

The crime data is aggregated in six categories: accidents, burglary, robbery, stolen vehicle, theft, vandalism, and vehicle prowl. The data can then be selected by time period, which includes comparison by year, six-month period or 30-day period.

Once the information is chosen, it appears in a bar graph comparison and then can be selected to appear on a Google Map. The data can then be broken down by

the day of the week and time of day the crime occurred.

Vehicle prowls, vandalism and burglaries increased in Birch Bay during the year-to-year data available before press time, which was between August 26, 2018 to August 25, 2019 and August 26, 2019 and August 25, 2020.

Vehicle prowls in Birch Bay increased 75 percent from 24 to 42 prowls between the two comparison years. Vandalism in Birch Bay increased 57 percent from the previous year. Burglaries increased 16 percent from 36 to 42, as well. Stolen vehicles also increased 80 percent from five to nine in the year-to-year data for Birch Bay, although the

small sample size creates a large percent increase.

While these crimes increased, accidents in Birch Bay decreased 42 percent from 21 to 12 accidents between the two years. Robbery and theft also decreased in Birch Bay.

In Birch Bay's data comparing two six month periods, August 2019 to February 2020 and February to August, burglaries, theft and vandalism increased, while accidents, stolen vehicles and vehicle prowls decreased.

Burglaries in Birch Bay were the largest increase in the six-month data, which climbed 56 percent from 16 to 25 burglaries. The largest decrease was vehicle prowls, at 64 percent, as prowls

decreased from 31 to 11.

"Having access to this information will enable residents to have a better understanding of what is happening in their communities," said Whatcom County sheriff Bill Elfo in a news release on the dashboard. "The sheriff's office utilizes this type of information to identify emerging crime trends and historical patterns of criminal activity to allocate resources and provide targeted patrols."

The Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Records Management System provides data for the dashboard, which is updated every 24 hours. Visit whatcomcounty.us/3442/Crime-Stats to view the crime dashboard.

Testing ...

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"We are refining times and locations. There will be some tweaks – we may move a site from the morning to the afternoon – but we are continuing this program," she said. "This is a long-term program."

Those with insurance must provide insurance information for billing purposes when scheduling an appointment. The program is designed for drive-through testing, but it can accommodate people who don't have a vehicle. To be tested without a car, call 370/778-6075. To schedule a test in a language other than English, call 360/778-6075.

As of August 23, 1,057 people in Whatcom County have tested positive for Covid-19 and 39 have died from the virus, according to the Washington State Department of Health. Three people in the county have been hospitalized with the disease this month, according to the state data, although the state's dashboard didn't yet have complete data past August 17 at press time.

As of August 23, Whatcom County's rate of new cases per 100,000 people in the past two weeks was 33.3. That number declined in recent weeks and is the lowest of any large or medium-sized county in the state, Lautenbach said.

It's also close to the state's goal of 25 new cases per 100,000 per

two-week period, which, before governor Jay Inslee paused reopening indefinitely on July 28, was a metric for counties to be able to apply for a higher phase with fewer restrictions.

When Inslee announced that counties could no longer move to higher phases in the state's Safe Start Washington plan, case counts were increasing statewide. The rate of new cases has declined statewide through

August, but the state hasn't yet revisited its decision to pause reopening.

Lautenbach said on August 25 that she had a call scheduled with the state to talk about the county's low case rate and whether restrictions could soon be relaxed.

"It's really a statewide decision," she said. "I don't see this changing at the moment but we are in conversations with the state about that."



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