



St. Elizabeth nurses went three weeks without N-95 masks



PHOTO BY RAY MILLER-STILL

All visitors, staff, and administration are screened at St. Elizabeth Hospital entrances for any signs of COVID-19.

According to CHI Franciscan officials, supply of the essential PPE gear dropped to just 3-days worth in March.

BY RAY MILLER-STILL
Editor

St. Elizabeth Hospital is only one of numerous facilities on the front line of the fight against COVID-19.

But since the beginning of the outbreak, the Enumclaw community has heard little about what's happening inside their local hospital — questions posed by the Courier-Herald about the number of patients and staff who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the facility's COVID-19 patient capacity, and the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff have gone unanswered.

Meanwhile, the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths have continued to rise. As of April 20, there have been 64 confirmed cases and 16 deaths reported in the 98022 ZIP code, according to the King County COVID-19 dashboard.

Tired of the silence, three St. Elizabeth nurses — who asked to remain anonymous for fear of losing their jobs — contacted the Courier-Herald to share details of their daily battles with both COVID-19 and hospital administration.

Many of their allegations have been corroborated by a spokesperson for their union, SEIU 119 NW, who said she heard “similar” accounts from other members, though declined to give specifics.

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The biggest concerns all three nurses had were interrelated — simply, they felt unsafe working at the hospital without N-95 respirator masks or other PPE necessary to protect them against COVID-19, and that their fear was exacerbated by an administration they see as unwilling to communicate and quick to punish.

St. Elizabeth Hospital and CHI Franciscan was unable to comment before print deadline.

FEW PPE, LESS COMMUNICATION

Hospitals around the county, state and nation are short of personal protective equipment, from the N-95 masks to PAPR and CAPR helmets, which shield the whole skull and have their own air purifying systems to filter out contagions.

St. Elizabeth, run by CHI Franciscan, was no exception. One nurse said duty nurses noticed early on that the N-95 masks were no longer being stored in their regular space, replaced by a sign that said the masks had been “sequestered” as of Feb. 28, roughly a

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Buckley, Black Diamond jump on the virtual meeting bandwagon

BY RAY MILLER-STILL
Editor

City business has gone virtual on the Plateau.

Following in Enumclaw's footsteps, the Buckley City Council held their first virtual meeting on Tuesday, April 14, and Black Diamond has scheduled its first meeting this Thursday, April 23.

All three cities are able to hold virtual meetings because of Gov. Jay Inslee's suspension of certain portions of the Open Public Meeting Act on March 24; namely, the requirement that the public is able to attend meetings in person.

Inslee's original suspension of the OPMA only lasts for 30 days, or until midnight on April 23. It's unclear if he will extend the suspension, and any announcement regarding

an extension would have been made after press deadline.

Inslee's March 24 proclamation also limited city councils to only performing “necessary and routine matters” or items specifically addressing the COVID-19 outbreak. For Buckley, this included canceling council and staff reports and reviewing a memo about social distancing, approving payroll and council minutes, and awarding a bid for Cedar Street improvements during the city council's April 14 meeting.

Buckley Mayor Pat Johnson said she expects meetings to continue virtually for the foreseeable future.

“I think we're going to be doing safe distancing for quite a while,” she said, “so we're going to have to get a few longer cords for the recording materials.”

The public is only able to call

into the Zoom meeting and listen; no public comment will be taken. However, residents can email city staff or council members for comments to be read into the minutes.

To listen to live council meeting, residents can download the online agenda or agenda packet at <https://www.city-of-buckley.com/council> and follow the call-in instructions.

BLACK DIAMOND

Like Buckley, Black Diamond's April 23 agenda is short and sweet; Mayor Carol Benson plans to proclaim April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and the council plans to approve payroll and claim checks, meeting minutes, and to reaffirm the mayor's

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Green River College offers free webinar for local businesses

The online presentation will go over how to access various federal loans and business basics that will help you weather the pandemic

BY RAY MILLER-STILL
Editor

COVID-19 news changes quickly — day to day, if not hour to hour.

This has made it difficult for local businesses to keep track of what resources are currently available to them, like grants, loans, and more, while they're also trying to plan for the future and successfully weather this pandemic.

Luckily, the Green River College's Small Business Center is hosting a free webinar on current resources and successful planning strategies for local businesses on April 28, starting at 9

a.m. The webinar is in partnership with both the city of Enumclaw and the Enumclaw Chamber of Commerce.

“Planning, resources available and having the GRC team available to assist [you] in answering questions is part of this free webinar,” said Mayor Jan Molinaro in an email. “It is hoped that any business, small, medium and large will find this webinar helpful in guiding them in sustaining their business during this slow time as well as when the economy begins to ramp up again.”

To sign up for the webinar, you must email Enumclawcampus@greenriver.edu to receive the Zoom link to join the meeting. The host will be Kevin Grossman, MBA, who is one of the college's

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PPE

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month after the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Washington.

"We did start out with N-95s and we did start out with the CAPRs," one nurse said, but "it would literally switch mid-shift — 'oh, no, you can't do this now, you have to do that.' Everything would switch. You'd never know hour by hour what leadership was mandating you to do."

All three nurses said that until recently, staff were instructed to not wear N-95 masks unless COVID-19 patients were receiving what's known as an "aerosolized-generating procedure," which are procedures where the patient is likely to cough, sneeze, or otherwise expel air and moisture. Examples of AGPs include endoscopies, airway suctioning, CPR and stage two labor.

"CAPRs and N-95 masks will only be worn by front line staff caring for COVID positive or rule out patients requiring aerosolizing procedures," reads a March 18 email from St. Elizabeth Vice President of Operations Renee Yanchura to all hospital staff. "Staff not caring for patients requiring aerosolizing procedures are instructed to wear a simple surgical mask with eye protection."

According to multiple St. Elizabeth documents, wearing the simple surgical masks and eye gear was known as Special Droplet Contact Precautions.

"Current SYSTEM PPE resources have increased due to CommonSpirit Health resources available now, and donations from many entities... We are in better shape in regard to PPE than the month of March, when we had a 3-day supply as a system."

Renee Yanchura,
VP of Operations, St. Elizabeth Hospital

All three nurses said they understood why they needed to be careful to preserve N-95 masks, which filter out smaller particles than regular surgical masks, but they wanted more communication from upper management as to what sort of situation they were facing.

"I have to give management/ leadership people some leeway because we're all trying to figure this out. Our concern is, we wanted more of a collaborative culture. Not punitive, which is what it's turned into," one nurse said. "Everyone knows there's a shortage of masks... So come to us and say, 'Houston, we have a problem here... let's figure this out.'"

Between March 18 and April 8, it appears only indication bottom-level staff received about PPE shortages at their hospital came from the March 18 email from Yanchura.

"The increase in people across Washington with respiratory symptoms needing care is

straining our healthcare system's supply of PPE in many areas," the email reads, adding that the state Department of Health was working with the Strategic National Stockpile, the Emergency Management Division, and the Department of Enterprise Services to find more PPE. "It is important for our first responders and healthcare system partners to know that even with these efforts, we will not meet the full need in our state. We have received 655 requests from partners and have been able to fill 52 of them."

Nurses were able to resume wearing N-95 mask when treating most or all COVID-19 patients at the beginning of April.

"In keeping with CDC guidelines, now that PPE is more available all facilities will return to Airborne Respirator Contact Precautions as our first choice," reads an April 8 COVID 19 Huddle Notes document.

Airborne Respirator Contact Precautions are more strict than Special Droplet Contact

"There's a huge amount of fear. We're not breaking any laws. We're just trying to make sure we're protected so we can take care of patients."

Anonymous,
St. Elizabeth nurse

Precautions, namely because N-95 masks or PAPR/CAPR helmets are required.

Why nurses were able to resume wearing N-95 masks was explained in an April 9 email from Yanchura to all St. Elizabeth staff, which also revealed how the local hospital and the entire CHI Franciscan system came close to running out of protective gear.

"Current SYSTEM PPE resources have increased due to CommonSpirit Health resources available now, and donations from many entities," the email reads. "We are in better shape in regard to PPE than the month of March, when we had a 3-day supply as a system."

The email also stated that CHI Franciscan now had a 95-day supply of N-95 masks, and emphasized that its previous Special Droplet Contact Precautions were consistent with CDC and Department of Health mandates.

But those three weeks of radio silence from administration took its toll on St. Elizabeth staff when rumors began to fly and staff were being reprimanded.

All three nurses, plus their union representative, either heard of or saw nurses from

other hospitals who came to temporarily work at St. Elizabeth complained about the lack of N-95 masks and CAPR helmets when treating COVID-19 patients, saying they were allowed to use the PPE at their regular places of work. The nurses added that administration then allowed them to use the PPE when regular staff could not.

At one point, a nurse was fired mid-shift for donning a CAPR or N-95 when entering a COVID-19 patient's room after being specifically instructed not to do so. The Courier-Herald confirmed the firing, but the nurse declined to comment, citing ongoing negotiations with the hospital.

"There's a huge amount of fear," one nurse said. "We're not breaking any laws. We're just trying to make sure we're protected so we can take care of patients."

Although it was announced early on in April that PPE supplies were more abundant, one nurse said that as late as Friday, April 17, that they still haven't seen additional N-95 masks come their way.

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PPE

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NO HOMEMADE MASKS

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been countless feel-good news stories about community members sewing cloth masks for their local healthcare workers, including in Enumclaw.

But it appears St. Elizabeth nurses were not allowed to wear homemade masks, even when CHI's systemwide supply of N-95 masks dropped to just three days worth.

"We are investigating the use of donated cloth masks," a March 23 COVID-19 Huddle Notes document reads. "Stay tuned for the pattern, directions, material type and specifics regarding the donated cloth mask this week."

However, an April 1 Huddle Notes document stated: "At this time, personal masks (those not provided by CHI Franciscan) may not be worn by employees in the hospitals/clinics."

Some nurses have clearly disregarded that order.

"The only ones we've been able to keep for ourselves have been back-channel things, like people bring them over to somebody's house, or they bring them in the hospital and give them to a specific nurse when management isn't around," one nurse said. "We hide them away so that management doesn't know we have them, because if they see them, they're like, 'Oh no, you have to turn those in.'"

At some point, at least one St. Elizabeth nurse went to social media to either ask for donations of cloth masks and tell their followers about the PPE situation at the hospital, which earned them stern warnings from their superiors.

"Nurses are also getting reprimanded by management saying, 'You have to stop saying that on Facebook. You have to stop telling the community that we don't have these PPEs because it's making it look like we're not supporting you,'" one nurse said.

"As a reminder, social media is considered actual media and staff are not permitted to represent CHI Franciscan without prior approval," a March 28 COVID-19 Huddle Notes document reads. "Sharing information intended for staff only is a policy violation, and may cause unnecessary risk to the organization if misinterpreted by others outside our organization."

As of April 8, CHI appeared ready to distribute homemade or cloth masks to St. Elizabeth and other hospital staff, according to another COVID-19 Huddle Notes document.

"In the next 7 to 10 days, CHI Franciscan employees will be given a set of cloth masks... that must be worn as part of their work attire," the document reads. "Cloth masks will work in place of simple masks."

An April 13 email from CHI confirmed that when homemade mask donations were arriving in hospitals, the masks were sent to Tacoma for cleaning and counting before being then sent "throughout the system" based on need.

Still, one nurse was adamant that local donations should have come back to St. Elizabeth.

"If my community is donating to my hospital, then it needs to stay here," she said, adding that she had no issue with sharing masks, but would have wanted better communication regarding them. "[Administration is] not treating nurses like we're actually in a fight here, and trying to help people. I do want to say I'm very thankful for the help the community has given us, and they've given us a lot more help than our management has."

UNKNOWN CASE NUMBERS

As with the status of PPE and homemade masks, the three St. Elizabeth nurses say administration has not been forthcoming about how many positive cases have come through the hospital, or even how many patients have died from the virus.

"We can only do tallies in our head of what we know from working there," one said.

"It's hard to track the number of positives and negatives because we had to re-test people a couple times... you'd have to do some digging to get that number," another said. "At the end of the day, they might have it, when all this is said and done and the dust has settled, but when you have people negative and they turn positive... there was a lot of variables in that."

March and April Huddle Notes documents did not give any indication of how many positive cases or deaths have gone through St. Elizabeth. The Courier-Herald has made multiple requests for those numbers, and CHI has responded with only system-wide statistics.

Webinar

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small business advisers. Grossman has already done three other webinars for other nearby cities.

When not faced with a world-wide viral outbreak, Grossman said, the Small Business Center works to help small business with everything from start-ups that are writing their business plan and to succession and transition strategies for existing businesses.

"My background happens to be more in facilities and finance. If you want a loan, I'm really good at helping you get that," Grossman said. "If you want to know the ins and outs of SEO (search engine optimization) and social media, I'm not your guy, but I can connect you to someone in your network that's really, really good at that."

Funding for the program comes from both the Small Business Administration, the national Small Business Development Centers, and local cities like Enumclaw, Kent, Maple Valley, and Covington, so that it's always free for businesses.

At the beginning of this

"The question is, when the curve flattens and people start shopping normally again... what have you done to prepare and make sure that you're in touch with your customers and you incentivize them to reconnect with you?"

Kevin Grossman,
Green River College Small Business Adviser

pandemic, the Small Business Center helped businesses figure out things like economic injury and payroll protection loans.

"Now that both of those programs are at least temporarily maxed out funding-wise, we're back to basics, which is cash flow management and forecasts," he continued.

Grossman also plans to talk about how keep your current customer base engaged so you don't lose that financial support once the COVID-19 curve flattens and the quarantine lifts.

"The question is, when the curve flattens and people start shopping normally again — or whatever normal looks like at the end of this — what have

you done to prepare and make sure that you're in touch with your customers and you incentivize them to reconnect with you?" Grossman said.

The session will end with questions and answers, and although the session is aiming to end at 10 a.m., "if the Q&A is going hot and heavy, it'll extend out a little bit," Grossman said.

More information about the Green River College's Small Business Center can be found at <https://www.greenriver.edu/students/academics/continuing-community-education/small-business-center/grow/>; Grossman can be contacted directly at kgrossman@greenriver.edu or his office line at 253-520-6263.

Meeting

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emergency declaration and office closure orders. The only piece of new business is the reading of an ordinance granting Tacoma a non-exclusive franchise to construct and maintain a water system within Black Diamond's right-of-way.

Unlike Buckley, Black Diamond's council meeting can be watched or listened

to; instructions to watch the meeting or to dial in using a phone, are provided on council agendas and packets at http://www.ci.blackdiamond.wa.us/Depts/Clerk/Agendas/2020_agendas.html.

The public will not be able to comment during the live meeting — written comments should be submitted to City Clerk Brenda Martinez at bmartinez@blackdiamondwa.gov by 5 p.m. on April 22; please include in the subject line of the email "Public Comment 4/23/20" and include your name.

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All are warmly invited to attend

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