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**CATEGORY:** News Release

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**REGARDING:** Holiday Letter by Dr. Artzis, MD, Health Officer

Traditionally, we look to the holidays with hope and joy, and this year is no different. Despite record numbers of COVID-19 cases locally and nationally, full, and over-filled hospitals, and resultant restrictions, there is hope. A vaccine is on the way, which, along with masking, social distancing, and avoiding crowds will expedite and more safely reach the end of the current pandemic. We can likewise take comfort that we will persevere, and I pray our families will be whole in numbers when the COVID-19 storm is retreating, and the sun is shining again.

A COVID-19 "2 shot" vaccine will be available in December for front-line health workers and our most vulnerable population in long-term care facilities or the like. The general-public likely will receive the vaccine as soon as April 2021. The vaccine looks to be very effective and has relatively mild side effects which may include pain at the injection site, fever, and flu-like symptoms. These symptoms, if they occur, tell us our body is reacting to the vaccine as expected and is building antibodies to fight the actual virus should we later become infected.

Northeast Tri County Health District (NETCHD) appreciated early-on that our children needed to be in school if in-person learning could be safely achieved. We have worked very closely with school superintendents since summer to present to develop guidelines that will keep students and staff safe. The result is minimal transmission of disease while in school, and the hope is to phase into more in-person learning.

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Masks work! They decrease the transmission of COVID-19 and other illnesses. We now know that the COVID-19 virus remains airborne and social distancing helps keep us away from the virus when around others. Good handwashing is the single-most important measure in the transmission of disease in the world, and if done frequently, many epidemics could be prevented. Staying home when we are sick prevents us from spreading any disease to others. Avoiding large gatherings, especially this time of year when we are mainly indoors in poorly ventilated areas, is sure to keep COVID-19 numbers from rising at such a steep incline. Holiday travel and large family gatherings are no exception! By avoiding our traditional gatherings, we truly will be saving lives.

The alarming increase in COVID-19 cases nationally is reflected locally. We keep hearing it is "just the result of increased testing." If this were the case and COVID-19 was under control, we should be seeing the rate of positivity (number of positive COVID-19 cases/number of tests) decline. Our rate of positivity is increasing in all three counties (Ferry, Pend Oreille, Stevens). Likewise, we regularly hear that COVID-19 "isn't that bad." If COVID-19 were not a serious illness, then our hospitals should be functioning as usual. We are currently at capacity in all our regional hospital including Idaho, and things are getting worse.

Staffing at hospitals across the nation and locally is the critical challenge. If we look at the national picture, we see almost every state is experiencing alarming increases in COVID-19 cases, and, as a result, increased hospitalizations. "But COVID-19 cases are just a fraction of the beds these big hospitals have," is another popular refrain we hear from skeptics. COVID-19 patients take a great deal of effort to manage and are time and staff intensive. It's not a matter of bed or ventilator availability as we saw previously but now a matter of nurse and doctor availability. Since almost every state in our nation is seeing a rapid increase in hospitalizations, we cannot get traveling nurses or doctors to help-out.

How does that affect me if I do not have COVID-19 but need medical care? Consequent to staffing shortages, non-COVID medical emergencies may not be attended to in a timely fashion. A heart attack, stroke, and trauma each requires immediate attention, and the "golden hour" likely will become several hours before definitive care can be offered. Transportation by ambulance in rural areas is already limited, and patients requiring advanced life support enroute to regional hospitals are stressed and response times to rural areas are much longer. Helicopter flight is limited during inclement weather. Our hospital staff is at capacity and diversion to other hospitals outside our region is occurring, which further delays care.

How do we free up staffing? Elective surgeries will be canceled, which at this time of year, is a large burden for those who have paid their deductibles. This is a popular time of year for upper and lower diagnostic endoscopies, orthopedic surgeries, gynecologic surgeries, and similar "non-emergent" procedures. Ask anyone with a bad hip or knee if they consider their severe pain and limited mobility to be "non-emergent," and they will strongly disagree. Postponing elective surgeries will free up some hospital staff to take care of the record number of COVID-19 patients we are seeing daily. With the holiday season upon us, the numbers are going to be worse as people gather.

So why the recent restrictions? Noting the above recent sharp increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations locally and across the state, Governor Inslee and the Washington State Board of Health realized they had to decrease the traffic in places where increased spread of COVID-19 was occurring. Data from the spring reflected restaurants, gyms, churches, and the like were sources of increased transmission in the community. The goal is to limit further spread of COVID-19.

How can I do my part to help with this crisis? Our behavior makes a difference! Despite all of us being tired, discouraged, and ready to give up, we can help our medical system and keep our neighbors alive until the vaccine is widely available. As United States of America citizens who have faced many challenges in our history, we can do this together for however long it takes to put the COVID-19 pandemic in our rear-view mirror. We can shorten the time of our suffering and save lives while exercising measures under our control.

This holiday we can make a profound difference for others like never before! Our 'giving' should not be the transmission of COVID-19 to others by ignoring measures we now know work. We can truly help others and save lives if we mask up, avoid large gatherings, and stay home when we are sick. We are helping our economy and keeping our children in school. Despite overwhelming, confusing messaging and information, restrictions, and sometimes chaos, we can be hopeful and take comfort that our actions will save lives. What better gift to give for the holidays?

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