

Transcript for NC DHHS and NC AHEC Weekly Business Forum
May 20, 2020
11:30 AM – 12:00 PM

Presenters:

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Please stand by for realtime captions.

Maribeth Wooten:

Good morning everyone. Thank you for participating in today's webinar on the state's COVID-19 response. This forum is sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Public Health, NC Employment Security Commission, and NC AHEC for the business community. The purpose is to provide a quick update on the state's activities and respond to your questions. My name is Maribeth Wooten and I'm with the North Carolina Division of Public Health and the NC Department of Health and Human Services. I'll be moderating today. Before I turn it over to the presenters, I want to take a brief moment to thank you for making time on your schedule for today and for all you are doing. We hope this is helpful in the important work you do and make navigating these trying times a little easier.

Our presenters today are Dr. Jean-Marie Maillard, Medical Director of the Communicable Disease Branch of the Epidemiology Section of the Division of Public Health, Veronica Bryant, who is in Emergency Preparedness and Outbreak with the Environment Health section in the NC Division of Public Health. We hope to also be joined by our colleague Chinita Arceneaux who is a program analyst in the Division of Employment Security for the Department of Commerce for the state. Our colleagues at Employment Security are very busy, so we hope that she will be joining us.

After the presenters finish their updates, we will turn to your questions. We learned in past forums that presenters will often address your questions during their presentations. We should have times for questions and I encourage you to wait until the presenters are through before submitting a question. Please know if we can't get your questions, we will forward them to the panelists who can follow up directly. To submit questions during the forum, please use the Q&A function in the black bar on the bottom of the screen. On the phone, please submit questions by sending an email to questionscovid19webinar@gmail.com.

The next slide includes links to relative resources for your convenience. We will record the webinar and make the recording a written transcript and these slides available to the public as soon as possible on the North Carolina AHEC website. Now let me turn it over to Dr. Maillard.

Dr. Jean-Marie Maillard:

Good morning, everyone. I will be very brief today to give more time to Veronica Bryant who is graciously agreeing to join this call. We understand that most of the interest to this call is about the reopening, so I will make my remarks very brief.

The total number of reported confirmed cases in North Carolina currently is at 20,000. The number of reported deaths are reaching almost 700. We're at 699.

I would like to direct you to the state link that is provided on the slide. If you go to that slide, you can get a lot of information. Today is the first day of a new dashboard that will provide you with data. If you have already looked at it, you will notice that the numbers are not yet aligned. It is now at 19,700 and that will be fixed sometime during the day. It is an interactive dashboard with lots of information including the criteria that are monitored to make decisions about progressing in easing the restrictions.

The four main criteria, just remind you, they have been covered many times in press availability by our governor and secretary are the trend of COVID-like syndromic cases seen in the emergency department, the number of laboratory confirmed cases, the proportion of positive tests as a percentage of total tests, and this we expect to go down because there is a major push to increase testing. You will see that take many forms. Right now, we test about somewhere between 5000 and 7000 persons in the state every day. There is an intent to go to much higher, almost probably close to double that. When we go into that, you will also hear that testing in the most vulnerable populations or people in contact with these populations such as staff working in long-term care facilities like nursing homes and others. This is going to start being done systematically and repeatedly first with staff and then the residents also. The idea being that if we can recognize new cases very early, we can take measures to prevent the spread from these cases rapidly, and hopefully continue to get to lower incidents.

In terms of information, on the state website, toward the top you will see a blue row that can give you access to the dashboard. I want to call your information to the one that is called "guidance." From there, you can go to guidance that is specific to businesses including guidance being developed in the state of North Carolina and also many links to guidance on the CDC website. I will stop and let Erica follow up from here. Thank you.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you Dr. Maillard. Veronica, please?

Veronica Bryant:

Yes. I'm happy to be with you all here today. My name is Veronica Bryant and I'm with the Environmental Health section within the Division of Public Health and we are responsible for the permitting and inspection of restaurants as well as lodging facilities and long-term care facilities, childcare, school buildings. All of the local health departments have been working hard to help keep businesses informed as to what's going on. We know everyone is anticipating the move from phase 1 to phase 2 which will happen when the trends and the tracing and the tracking benchmarks are met. Within our section and within the whole Division of Public Health and the entire department, we've been working to make sure that people are ready and they have the information they need as we move into phase 2. The two links added to your screen right now at the bottom, one is the link to the restaurant reopening guidance. For many of you, that may not have specific relevance in your business. I posted this link because we will have similar guidance documents for many different business types as we move into phase 2, giving you the information you need as to what's required and what's recommended. I put this on here so that you could see the restaurant one and know that the other business types will be coming in the coming days as we move to phase 2. You can get familiar with that format for those guidance documents.

I want to spend most of my time letting you all know about a program that's being provided in collaboration with the North Carolina Restaurant Lodging Association and Visit NC. The Department of Health and Human Services has partnered with these groups as well as NC State University Cooperative Extension to have a free training program called "Count On Me NC". You can see the website there. It is countonmenc.org, and if you go to that website, you can see that there are three trainings for businesses right now. They are the restaurant manager course and individual courses for

front-of-house employees in restaurants like wait staff, cashiers, hostesses as well as the back of the house like cooks and dishwashers and other food service staff. Those three trainings are available free of charge. They take about 30 minutes. Once a restaurant manager completes the course, they will be issued a certificate that they can post. They can also register on that website to be listed as a participating business and will be given promotional materials as well as access to additional resources. As this campaign is rolled out through press coverage and other social media, we hope that this will increase consumer confidence in the work that's being done by both the businesses and the Department of Health and Human Services to make sure that as we move into phase 2, everyone is working together to do that in the safest way possible.

There's also consumer information listed on that website, so things that consumers can do as they move back into restaurants. For those of you that are not restaurant businesses, by next week, hopefully by the middle of the week, there will be two additional trainings that are available and not restaurant specific. One of them is on general cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting that needs to be done. We know that these aren't things you are used to doing and there may be terms that are unfamiliar and processes you have questions about. We have that general cleaning module only about 30 minutes and free of charge. There will be a general business course that can be taken by anyone from a salon or fitness center to a lodging facility, museum or visitor center, church, retail business or really anyone else that may have questions about how to implement measures to reopen your business safely. Businesses that complete the general business course will also be issued a certificate and can be listed as a participating business on the Count On Me NC website. We will have access to the promotional materials as well. We are hoping that as we move forward, people will see this. They will see the decals and the campaign and understand that they as the public have a part to play in this in terms of the three W's, wearing a face cloth covering, waiting six feet apart, washing hands, but also, the businesses enrolled in the program have taken extra steps to be trained and ready for safely opening. When we move into the question-and-answer phase, I'm happy to try to answer any questions about that program, or anything else I spoke of. Again, we are really, really excited about this program, so we hope that you all will take that general business course when it's available and check out that website. Thank you.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you, Veronica, for such excellent information. Let me check to see if our colleague at Division of Employment Security is on. Chinita, are you on?

Chinita Arceneaux:

I am on. First, thank you for allowing me to join the call today. I wanted to begin with a brief update of the unemployment insurance program in North Carolina as it stands right now. We have received over 1.2 million claims filed in North Carolina and of those claims, we paid out a total of \$2.2 billion in benefits to individuals across the state of North Carolina.

In North Carolina, we were one of the top states to implement two of the three programs from the C.A.R.E.S. Act. The PUA program, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, for those individuals who under normal circumstances don't follow qualify for regular unemployment insurance benefits, we implemented that as one of the first 15 states. We also implemented FPUC, which is the additional \$600 for individuals receiving unemployment insurance benefits during the week of April 4, 2020 through July 25, 2020. We have made great strides. The third program of the C.A.R.E.S. Act is PEUC, Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, providing an additional 13 weeks of benefits to be received after the exhaustion of the State's initial 12 weeks of benefits. The PEUC program will be implemented in North Carolina on Friday, May 22.

We recognize that there's been a lot of -- just based on her extensive workload, people have had difficulty reaching us via our phone line or website. We have taken great strides in terms of increasing capacity. We have added on 1400 additional staff to assist us with taking calls and processing claims to ensure that we are assisting the citizens of North Carolina to the best of our ability. Still, I wanted to

stress that the staff is the most efficient way of filing a claim is on our website. That is des.nc.gov open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and a claim filing process generally only takes 25 to 30 minutes. When filing a claim, you are needing to know your personal information, Social Security number, and address. It's a good idea to have a recent pay stub handy to provide your employment information. For those who have difficulty accessing our system via the website, you can call our call center at 888-737-0259.

As I mentioned previously, the C.A.R.E.S. Act added three additional programs for unemployment compensation. I wanted to provide information as to how you gain access to those programs. First, the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation Program, a lot of individuals have heard about that additional \$600. Each week an individual files for benefits, those are for the weeks only of April 4, 2020 through July 25, 2020. You don't have to do anything extra in terms of unemployment in order to receive those payments. If you filed claims for regular unemployment, as long as you are eligible for at least \$1 for any of those weeks during the period, you will also receive the additional \$600 for each of those weeks. Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, PUA, that's for the individuals who under normal circumstances don't qualify for UI, those who are self-employed, part of the gig economy, and those whose income is reportable on a 1099. Applying for PUA is just a matter of answering a few additional questions. That's after you file your original claim for unemployment insurance via our website. You will also need to provide proof of income from your 2019 statement, and if you are self-employed, proof of employment. With that information, we will calculate benefit entitlement for you. We use the standard calculations that we do for a regular claimant. If you don't qualify based on that structure, those individuals filing for PUA will at least receive the state minimum each week. Finally, the PEUC program. That program is going to be implemented on the 22nd, which is this Friday. It will require additional applications. It's not a matter of just exhausting regular UI and transitioning. You will need to answer a few additional questions and that will get your PEUC application started.

I just want to reiterate that we are experiencing a time we have never experienced before. We went from a period of receiving 20,000 to 30,000 claims a month to 20,000 to 30,000 claims a day if not more. We have done a lot to accommodate this massive volume. I would like to say for those individuals who have dealt with us, thank you for your patience. For those who need to in some way deal with us, again, thank you for your patience. We will work with you in any way we can to ensure you that you receive the benefits that you are entitled to, your employees receive the benefits they are entitled to for the duration of time that they should receive those benefits. Again, I'm open for questions at the end of the session. Thank you for this opportunity and for allowing me to share this information with you.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you Chinita. As a reminder, if you want to submit questions, you can use the Q&A function on the black bar on the bottom of the screen. If you are on the phone, you can submit questions by sending an email to questionscovid19webinar@gmail.com. There's a comment on the zoom app, not a question. That is, "good job to you and your team". So thank you to Dr. Maillard, Veronica, and Chinita. Here's a question.

Is there another phone number for PUA that is different from the others?

Chinita Arceneaux:

There is a different PUA number. If you want to move on to the next question while I pull that up, I will share before we drop the call.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you. That's actually all the questions we have submitted. Here's another one from the same person.

On the PUA number, the reason I'm asking is because the regular number does not know the pertinent information.

We will wait for a response on that.

Dr. Jean-Marie Maillard:

While we wait on that, I can add a couple of things to the general picture. This outbreak is lasting very long and has imposed a lot of restrictions. People are becoming impatient or frustrated in some cases and others are very concerned. Is that okay if I talk a little bit more about it?

Maribeth Wooten:

Yes. Please do.

Dr. Jean-Marie Maillard:

The state is doing its best to calibrate the reopening without taking too many risks. Of course, as we restrict or loosen the restriction, there's more interaction among people in the community and therefore that can lead to, a couple of weeks later, to more cases and associated with more cases and more deaths. I just wanted to share that there is an accumulation of data now all over the world looking at what has happened in different countries. What's often mentioned is that in Asia, in particular, there were success stories where restrictions were loosened. But in some of these places, in China for example, one of the most authoritative regime in the world, so people do have isolation or quarantine in specific places, things like that. As we reopen, places like Sweden and even we are beginning to hear about possibly Germany, Sweden has been quoted as being pretty open to let more interaction happen with the hope that more and more people, as a result, will become immune and gradually increase what's called herd immunity, which is many people who are immune to the infection, then chains of transmission are less likely to propagate. What we read now is that Sweden also has a high rate of per capita death rate. It's 319 per million in Sweden. In the U.S. for example, it's 242. I'm just saying that as a reminder, that there are risks when reopening, and that's why you hear about so many progressive reopening steps. There's more information about how masks and cloth face coverings work and they do truly decrease the risk of transmission by preventing the droplets when the respiratory droplets are produced when we breathe and speak. That's preventing the spread of it.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you, Dr. Maynard. We will see if Chinita is back with some information.

Chinita Arceneaux:

The PUA line is 866-847-7209. The standard call center number is 888-737-0259. Again, the dedicated PUA line is 866-847-7209. The call Center Line is 888-737-0259.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you, Chinita. We have a question from a medical provider that seems to be more appropriate for our Friday medical provider call, so we will save that. Reminder for folks, use the Q&A function in the black bar on the bottom of the screen or submit by email to questionscovid19webinar@gmail.com. That's questionscovid19webinar@gmail.com. We will wait just another minute to see if there's other questions.

Veronica Bryant:

This is Veronica. I will speak up really quickly and let people know that as we move into phase 2, it is important that consumers are invested in this process, which is why we are pushing for the consumer facing part of our Count On Me NC initiative as well. So go ahead and think of ways to diffuse the situations that may arise when people aren't following the three W's. Also think how to best arrange your business and your practices so that when you reopen, you have minimal interactions with your

customers because you want to keep your employees and yourself safe, as well as keeping them safe as we move forward.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you, Veronica. We have a question submitted that says, **I cannot get the guidance document open. I believe that is the PDF document. Can you talk that person through where that is located in the guidance section of the DHHS COVID-19 website?**

Dr. Maillard:

Go to the DHHS general website that's above, you will see there's a box for guidance in the blue band at the top. Click on guidance and you have a set for businesses. In phase 2, there's two documents posted. One is the guidance for restaurants. The other one is about overnight camps. There will be more as we go, but that's where you can find you can find the document.

Maribeth Wooten:

Thank you, Dr. Maillard. With that, we're at 12:00. We will close and thank the panelists. Thank you for what you are doing in these unprecedented times for our state and this world. Thank you again for joining us. Goodbye.

[Event Concluded.]