



Memorandum

**TO: MAYOR SETH FLEETWOOD, CITY OF BELLINGHAM
CITY HALL ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS AND VOLUNTEERS**

FROM: Erika Lautenbach, Health Department

DATE: NOVEMBER 30, 2020

RE: HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDANCE, RECOMMENDATIONS AND
REQUIREMENTS FOR CITY HALL ENCAMPMENT

The mission of the Whatcom County Health Department is to lead the community in promoting health and preventing disease. Our team of professionals include human services, environmental health, communicable disease, and community health promotion functions. We are committed to slowing the spread of COVID-19 in our community; we are actively working with those who provide services to our most vulnerable populations to limit exposure in order to prevent severe illness.

The Health Department is particularly concerned for the health and well-being of campers at City Hall who may also have substance use disorder or other behavioral health disorders, or other underlying health conditions, that put them at increased risk for severe illness.

Health Department professionals visited the City Hall encampment on Nov. 25 and Nov. 29 and this guidance is provided from our observations during those visits. We recognize this encampment germinated from a protest and was not anticipated or formally permitted by the City of Bellingham, and that there have been discussions about expectations between the City and organizers. We offer both broad and specific guidance, to share with camp residents, volunteers and organizers, for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and protecting campers vulnerable to severe COVID-19 illness. Specifically:



HIGH LEVEL GUIDANCE

First, the City and County will continue to identify and mobilize overflow/alternative sites to accommodate shelter/encampment decompression. Creating additional options for campers will allow for increased spacing between tents and reduced risk of transmission. We understand that this strategy is already being implemented including present efforts to include additional capacity at the Lighthouse Mission Drop-In Center and Base Camp's continued occupancy capacity, with Byron Street and a new managed public site with the City.

Second, Whatcom Unified Command provides and will utilize safe and supported options for isolation and quarantine. The Whatcom Unified Command operation runs an isolation and quarantine facility that is staffed 24/7 and has capacity to accommodate COVID-19-positive campers experiencing mild-to-moderate symptoms.

Third, because we believe additional capacity may be needed, encampment organizers will provide quarantine areas for campers who do not have symptoms or a positive test, but have been identified as a close contact of a case. The Health Department recommends that, if possible, the library lawn across from City Hall should be a self-selected and designated site for a (ideally, single occupancy tent) quarantine area. This would allow for volunteers to use additional precautions when interacting with campers in that area, would create physical space between exposed and unexposed campers, and would allow for additional monitoring of symptoms among those in quarantine.

Fourth, Whatcom Unified Command in coordination with providers will ensure that testing is available for City Hall campers should they develop symptoms or be a known close contact of a COVID-19-positive case. The Health Department is working with PeaceHealth and Unity Care to provide timely and accessible testing for campers with symptoms or a known, confirmed exposure.

SPECIFIC AND OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE

- We require universal mask use when outside tent or with people other than “family pod”
- We require that tents be positioned at least 12 feet apart to allow for social distancing when entering, exiting and moving between tents.
- We require touch-free thermometer and symptom checks when individuals approach the food tent. The Health Department can provide a touch-free thermometer and a list of symptoms for volunteers to ask when working at the food tent.
- We require that volunteers drop off food in at least three sites, rather than one site in front of the City Hall steps. We require campers to eat meals in their tents and limit any non-“family pod” communal meals, either inside or outside tents.
- We recommend identifying 1-2 more locations for warming tents. We require that there be limits on the number of people in each tent at a given time to maintain the ability to remain 6 feet apart, and prohibit eating, drinking, and smoking while in the warming tent.
- We recommend creating a designated smoking area within the camp, preferably adjacent to the street to limit camper exposure. The smoking area shall have occupancy limits to minimize camper-to-camper unmasked exposure. The smoking area must also prohibit campers share cigarettes or other smoking devices.
- As stated in broad recommendations above, we recommend a designated quarantine area for individuals exposed to a confirmed COVID-19 case.

Given our high level of concern for this vulnerable population, Health Department staff will monitor the conditions and compliance of this guidance by making daily site visits. If we determine the community measures are not in place to protect the unhoused City Hall campers, and there is a significant or sustained COVID-19 outbreak, we may recommend or require that campers disperse from a single site.

The Health Department is committed to partnering with the City, the City Hall encampment organizers and service provider organizations to protect our unhoused campers residing on the premises. We are also committed to working with partners on short, medium, and long-term solutions to provide supported housing and a wide range of services to residents to promote recovery and healing.