



Yakima Health District

Media Release

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COVID-19: One-Year Later in Yakima County, Businesses

Over the past year, most businesses and industries have had to adapt and modify their processes for the safety of their staff and customers. In Yakima County, where approximately 63% of businesses are considered essential and require people to work in-person, the experience has been unique from other parts of the state. This was seen most acutely as many businesses in other areas of the state could allow employees to work-from-home and see an immediate reduction in COVID-19 transmission. In Yakima County, businesses worked diligently with the Yakima Health District (YHD) to find ways to keep employees and customers safe, while also providing essential services like groceries, manufacturing construction, etc. to the community.

Volunteer-Based Outbreak Response Team

In April 2020, YHD identified large clusters of cases of COVID-19 that were observed primarily in the large agricultural warehouse facilities. Local businesses worked together to identify how to address the problem. As cases began to grow at fruit warehouses, meat packing plants and other manufacturing warehouses interventions were needed to stop the escalating spread of COVID-19. During this time, personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, were largely unavailable, and the number of cases continued to grow.

YHD met with agriculture business leaders to develop a plan of action to train representatives from various agricultural organizations on infection prevention measures. Volunteers and staff from the Washington Tree Fruit Association, Yakima County Development Association and the Yakima Health District received training from the Yakima Health District's Director of Disease Control and Environmental Health Director. This two-day training taught the newly created team proper site visit procedures, how to identify issues related to COVID-19 infection prevention, as well as the appropriate education and guidance to provide to the industry. Since this model was the first of its kind in Washington state for the agricultural industry COVID-19 response, representatives from the Washington State Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) visited Yakima County to observe and assist in these efforts. Through this partnership, a best practice for on-site infection prevention guidance, which started in long-term care facilities, was modified for use among businesses, which was then modified for use in schools and other facilities such as jails and temporary farmworker housing facilities. In total, 25 site visits were conducted by this team prior to the formation of a new Outbreak Response Team in August of 2020.

Mask up To Open Up

At the initial height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in May 2020, the Yakima Health District along with the City of Yakima, Yakima Downtown Association and Greater Yakima Chamber of Commerce partnered on several "Mask Up to Open Up" campaigns. When the campaign began, data demonstrated that Yakima County had the highest transmission rates throughout the whole West Coast. In an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19 and to ensure businesses could safely reopen, community members embraced the slogan of "Mask Up to Open Up".



Yakima Health District

During this time, most businesses worked quickly to install signage around the need for masking and social distancing, and many businesses signed the COVID-19 Business Pledge. Most significantly, many businesses committed to having staff at their business entrances, with masks available for anyone who may have forgotten to bring their mask. In this way, not only were we seeing and hearing messaging around “Mask Up to Open Up” but, with the help of businesses, mask use in public was quickly adopted as a norm.

The Yakima Health District, with the help of volunteers under the direction of Signal Health, launched the first county wide masking survey in Washington State on May 23, 2020. At that point, a 35% mask usage was observed. With the help of the “Mask Up to Open Up” campaign, by the time the statewide mask mandate went into effect on July 7, 2020, Yakima County already had 95% mask usage across the county. This mask usage has continued, as the most recent masking survey demonstrated 93% mask usage as of February 6, 2021.

Ongoing Work with YHD and Guidance Review

While all guidance and policies related to businesses being able to open came from the state level, the Yakima Health District was a readily available local source of information. The YHD staff had to quickly organize to ensure all information was available on the website and that business guidance was kept up to date, YHD call intake staff was increased to meet the high volume of phone calls received while staff was consistently updated and prepared to answer questions as changes occurred, and the Environmental Health Team was prepared to provide individualized consultation to businesses. In addition, YHD staff worked with YCDA to host webinars for business owners as well as to lead an “Open Yakima Taskforce,” which has met weekly since June 2020 to bring together stakeholders from various business communities.

Quotes:

“From the very beginning of the pandemic, we worked diligently with local businesses to provide accurate information and guidance to help ensure the safety of employees and patrons. The rapid creation of a business consulting team was a partnership with business organizations and government agencies to address the real-time needs of large essential businesses in our county. The Mask Up to Open Up campaign and the Open Yakima Taskforce were community efforts to allow Yakima County to safely reopen and we want to thank our partners for their steadfast commitment to supporting economic vitality. We are grateful for local businesses that worked so patiently to protect the safety of employees and customers and we sincerely thank community members for doing their part to follow public health recommendations, which allowed our businesses to open safely and well.” -Andre Fresco, Executive Director, Yakima Health District

“This last year has been an extremely trying time for everyone in Yakima County, especially our local businesses. It has been our goal to support businesses and find ways to have them open and operating safely. These efforts have led to many partnerships within our community, and I thank each and every person that has been involved in this effort. It is an honor and a privilege to serve Yakima County in my role at the Yakima Health District.” Shawn Magee, Environmental Health Director, Yakima Health District

RESOURCES

[**YCDA COVID-19 Business Relief Dashboard**](#)