

NEWS

Local leaders, public health officials raise concerns about state reopening plan metrics

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Published 1:42 p.m. PT Jan. 30, 2021

Local leaders and public health officials in Kitsap, Clallam and Jefferson counties are voicing their ire about the state's COVID-19 "Roadmap to Recovery" after Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday that two regions would move forward to Phase 2 of the plan.

Inslee announced Thursday that seven counties — Snohomish, King, Pierce, Thurston, Lewis, Pacific and Grays Harbor — will be allowed to relax COVID-19 restrictions on indoor dining, entertainment, fitness and sporting activities starting Monday.

The governor also announced changes to the economic reopening plan, which was first announced earlier this month. The plan grouped counties into eight regions, which needed to meet four metrics in order to advance: a 10% decreasing trend in case rates over a two-week period; a 10% decrease in coronavirus hospital admission rates in that same timeframe; an ICU occupancy rate that's less than 90%; and a test positivity rate of less than 10%.

Now, regions only have to meet three of the four metrics. The state will evaluate metrics every two weeks instead of weekly.

The news was met with an outcry from members of the public and health officials from around the state, who argued that the metrics don't accurately reflect the risk of transmission and that the regional approach punishes counties that have shown improvement by tying them to their neighbors.

"We're doing our best, our residents are stepping up and doing what they need to do and masking and social distancing and not gathering in their homes to change our metrics and yet those are obliterated by the blending of the stats from other counties," Kitsap County Commissioner Rob Gelder said.

The Northwest Region, which includes Kitsap, Clallam, Jefferson and Mason counties, fell one metric short of being able to advance to Phase 2. The region showed a 20% increase in case rate between Jan. 3 and Jan. 16 and a 16% increase in hospital admission rate between Jan. 10 to Jan. 23, according to the state's reopening dashboard.

But those numbers don't reflect the actual risk of transmission, Jefferson County Public Health officer Dr. Tom Locke said. Because the metrics measure trends with percentages, more populous regions can experience a decrease in the percentage of cases but still show a much higher number of cases than less populous regions.

"The problem with percentages is they sometimes they distort what's going on," Locke said. "You go from 5 to 10 and that's a 100% increase, but you go from 500 to 600, it's an increase of 100 but it's a much smaller percentage."

The data used to make the decision is also inaccurate and old, Locke said. The state dashboard notes that negative test results are incomplete and that testing rate, percent positivity and case counts should be "interpreted with caution."

In an email to the Kitsap Sun, Clallam County Health Officer Dr. Allison Berry acknowledged that the Department of Health worked hard to choose metrics that would reflect the reality of the pandemic, "However when you see a county like King with more than three times the case rate of Clallam County move forward faster, you have to question whether the correct metrics were chosen."

"These kinds of outcomes should cause all of us to question the systems that created them and consider changing them," Berry wrote.

Locke emphasized that the issue is not that one region gets to unfairly open before another, but that the regions that are opening include three of the four counties that have driven the coronavirus pandemic in Washington.

"The hot spots of this pandemic right now in Washington are Snohomish, King, Pierce and Yakima, that's where things are really hot and for any of those counties to back down, to diminish their containment efforts right now has consequences for the whole state," Locke said.

How metrics were chosen

When working on the roadmap, state health officials picked metrics that showed the "directionality" of the disease burden in a region, Department of Health Secretary for COVID-19 response Lacy Fehrenbach said in an email to the Kitsap Sun.

"The roadmap criteria consider multiple metrics to give us information about disease burden and trajectory as well as health system capacity. Using multiple metrics increases confidence that the situation is improving or worsening in a region," Fehrenbach wrote.

While local health data from Kitsap, Clallam and Jefferson counties show that the case rate per 100,000 has declined from a peak in mid-January, "it is important to note that these data are incomplete and therefore the rates or trajectory could still change," Fehrenbach added.

“The good news is that Northwest is meeting the ICU occupancy and percent positivity metrics, so if the Northwest region can maintain those and bring down its case rate or hospitalization rate by 10% or more, it will be able to advance forward to Phase 2.”

Concerns about the metrics ranged beyond Kitsap County and across the political spectrum.

State legislators from the 24th District — which encompasses the Olympic Peninsula including Jefferson, Clallam and Grays Harbor counties — released a statement raising issues with the changes. In the statement, Sen. Kevin Van De Wege (D-Sequim), Rep. Steve Tharinger (D-Port Townsend) and Rep. Mike Chapman (D-Port Angeles), said the new reopening plan is overly broad and relies on inconsistent metrics.

“This regional approach takes away local input and decisions and ignores local health officer’s science-based knowledge,” the statement reads. “Transmission and case-rate metrics in Clallam and Jefferson counties prove we have worked well to control the COVID-19 pandemic and have a firm grasp on this situation. However, when grouped with widely dissimilar counties in an arbitrarily drawn region, our success is ignored.”

Members of the public also spoke out about what they say is an unfair system. Steve Hays, an electrical engineer at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, said he had to explain to his daughter why her friends in Renton could play soccer beginning Monday but she could not.

Hays gave an example of the Northwest region’s hospital admission rate, which increased 16% from 5.6 to 6.5. The hospital admission rate in the Puget Sound Region, which includes Snohomish, King and Pierce Counties, dropped by 16%, from 17.4 to 14.6.

“That means they still have nearly three times the number of cases in the hospital,” Hays said. “Kitsap County has done all the right things, that’s why our cases are so low, and we’re being punished because our cases are so low, that’s how I feel.”