

HOT TOPIC #16: April 15th

An Insider's Look at the San Juan County COVID Response Team

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders

The first thing you need to know is that there are abbreviations for everything. From EOC (Emergency Operations Center) to PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) to IC (Incident Commander), everything this team does is designed to make the most of every resource, down to the number of keystrokes required to write a report.

More than 70 people are now part of San Juan County's response to COVID-19. Some are paid staffers, some are volunteers, but in our island community all of them are your neighbors—getting and giving daily briefings, and working together to anticipate and respond to the changing circumstances of the pandemic. Who is on this team? How did it begin and grow? How does it utilize limited resources to actively address the crisis? That is the subject of this Hot Topic.

More than seven weeks ago, as the global COVID-19 pandemic expanded rapidly in Washington State, San Juan County opened an Emergency Operations Center (EOC). It began as a small team, building on initial work done by the County Health Department since late 2019, and flexing in size to match the County's needs during this public health crisis. Current team members come from a multitude of local government agencies and community nonprofit organizations.

"It has been inspirational to see how fast our islands shifted into action to prepare to contain this disease," said County Council Member Jamie Stephens.

The EOC follows a national model of emergency management referred to as the Incident Command System (ICS—see? there's an abbreviation for everything), providing a standardized approach to coordination during an emergency response.

San Juan County Public Health Officer, Dr. Frank James said, "We recognized the potentially severe impacts of COVID-19 on the health of the islands and the certainty that COVID would present itself here soon. We knew we had to move fast and preparation time was limited."

Kyle Dodd, San Juan County Environmental Health Manager and the appointed Incident Commander, quickly broke the team into smaller, specialized groups, ensuring the efficient span of control needed to get things done fast. "As the EOC started to grow, the number of people who volunteered their professional experience and expertise also grew, adding depth and knowledge to our County's ability to prepare and respond," he said. "While we were building our capabilities, our volunteers and staff identified multiple areas of need which required our focus, and looked for innovative ways to address them."

The mix of personalities and backgrounds adds to the strength of the team. Kai Sanburn, a retired nurse, is working in Operations to coordinate care on Lopez Island: "This is a challenging situation and bigger than any one organization or agency. We're all in this together and getting involved in this response has been an opportunity to support my community. I'm continually amazed at the variety of people involved and the complexity of the operation."

Another volunteer, Nathan Kessler-Jeffrey, Executive Artistic Director of San Juan Community Theatre is a member of the EOC Public Information Officer team. "It's reassuring to know that communities with

more need are prioritized in our system. I was thrilled to discover that Washington State was able to *return* a field hospital and hundreds of ventilators to the Federal Government for use in other critical areas, like New York, which is where my brother and his family live.”

Dimitri Stankevich is the Executive Director of Orcas Center and coordinating on Orcas for the Operations team. Dimitri highlights, "I've been working in this community for a very long time and have always appreciated its energy, intelligence, and willingness to take on challenges. I've never seen it on display to such a large degree, but that community spirit isn't surprising to me. It is exactly what I'd expect from the islands."

Summarizing the effort, Council Member Stephens said, “Living here also means we have the responsibility and the privilege to contribute and help our community during challenging times. We all need to pitch in because the challenge will continue long after social distancing ends—and that is what is special about living here. We are a small group of communities and while we live on individual islands, we are tightly connected together.”

The San Juan County Emergency Operations Center would like to thank the following organizations for their contributions of time and resources to the COVID Response Team. This list is not complete, as the roster evolves daily, nor does it include the many, many community partners who are doing work that directly supports the response in the islands:

Agencies and Organizations: Lopez Island Family Resource Center, Compass Mental Health, San Juan EMS, SJI Family Resource Center, San Juan County Public Hospital District #1, Orcas Center, San Juan Island Fire and Rescue, Camp Orkila, San Juan Island Community Theater, San Juan Island EMS, Shaw Island Fire and Rescue, San Juan County Public Hospital Districts (SJI, Lopez, Orcas), Orcas Island Fire and Rescue, San Juan Island National Historic Park, Lopez Island Fire & Rescue, the Islands’ Oil Spill Association.

San Juan County Government Departments: San Juan County Health & Community Services, San Juan County Public Works, San Juan County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, San Juan County Parks & Fair, San Juan County Manager’s Office, San Juan County Auditor’s Office, San Juan County Sheriff’s Office, San Juan County Council, San Juan County Facilities, San Juan County Information Services, WA State University Extension, SJC Land Bank, San Juan County Community Development & Planning and the San Juan County Department of Emergency Management.