

SEARHC shares consortium-wide testing numbers, says community-only information too specific

By **CALEB VIERKANT**
Pilot writer

WRANGELL – The Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium, according to several members of Wrangell’s local government, has been doing a very good job of communicating with them during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Assembly Member David Powell said that communications between SEARHC, Mayor Steve Prysunka, and Borough Manager Lisa Von Bargen have been taking place almost daily. Prysunka and Von Bargen are really on top of things, he said. Assembly Member Drew Larrabee added that, in his opinion, communication between all state and local government and health entities has been well orchestrated during this pandemic. SEARHC and the city have both been regularly meeting and issuing press releases. However, some communities are receiving more information than Wrangell is.

The Petersburg Medical Center has been providing regular community-specific updates as to the number of COVID-19 tests being run. As of March 31, according to Petersburg Pilot reporter Brian Varela, 37 tests have been submitted from Petersburg. Of these tests, 17 have come back negative and the rest are still awaiting results.

However, similar information is not being made readily available for Wrangell

through the hospital. SEARHC operates the Wrangell Medical Center, and is also currently constructing a new hospital for the community. Maegan Bosak, director of marketing and communications for SEARHC, said she could provide consortium-wide numbers. Across all SEARHC facilities, in 20 communities in all, there have been 178 COVID-19 tests performed as of March 31. All of their clinic locations are equipped for the tests and are collecting samples for the tests, she wrote in an email to the Sentinel, “including Haines, Gustavus, Juneau, Hoonah, Angoon, Sitka, Kake, Wrangell, Klawock, and Hydaburg.” Aaron Angerman, PR specialist for SEARHC, explained why they could not provide community-specific testing numbers.

“As we serve dozens of small communities, including some with off-site COVID testing, disclosing community-specific numbers could potentially reveal those patients being administered tests,” he wrote in an email to the Sentinel. “SEARHC has issued tests to patients meeting the CDC approved guidelines for symptoms and exposure criteria. Given that there is known community spread in the state and region, SEARHC began testing all who meet the symptomatic criteria (fever and cough, or shortness of breath) late last week, regardless of travel history or exposure to confirmed cases.”

Angerman added that there is daily

communication between SEARHC and several other community organizations, including the city, the hospital, and EMS leadership. A joint community team also meets weekly to consolidate information, he wrote.

Larrabee said he understood SEARHC’s stance about not releasing community-specific numbers, saying that in small communities testing numbers could be so small that they could potentially identify who has been tested.

Erin Michael, public health nurse based in Petersburg, said she could not give an opinion on whether or not organizations should be releasing community-specific test results. It is a decision each entity has to make on their own.

“It’s up to each individual organization,” she said. “I can’t give a personal opinion.”

During a March 24 borough assembly meeting SEARHC vice president and hospital administrator Leatha Merculieff did provide a few general numbers for Wrangell.

“There have been about 100 tests that have been performed throughout the consortium, throughout SEARHC,” she said. “That’s not including Bartlett or Ketchikan, that is just our SEARHC locations. In Wrangell we have had about a dozen, all that have come back negative. We can’t specifically give out the numbers due to patient privacy in this community, as well


as our much smaller communities like Angoon where they only have a couple hundred, 300-400 people. To protect their privacy and provider privacy, we’re not giving any exact numbers that I can tell you.”

There are no known cases of COVID-19 in Wrangell as of March 31, according to Prysunka. He explained, on Facebook, that when somebody tests positive for COVID-19, the Department of Health notifies the person who was tested. The department also notifies the local emergency operations director. In Wrangell’s case, he said, that person is Captain Dorianne Sprehe of the fire department. Sprehe said that should a positive case be reported in Wrangell, she would then pass that information over to Von Bargen, who would then make sure the information got out to the rest of the community. In regard to receiving community-specific numbers, both Prysunka and Von Bargen said they had no reason to question SEARHC’s judgment or their work during this pandemic.

According to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, in a March 30 press release, there are a total of 119 COVID-19 cases across Alaska. According to the press release, the communities that have had laboratory-confirmed cases include Anchorage, Eagle River/Chugiak, Girdwood, Homer, Seward, Soldotna, Sterling, Fairbanks, North Pole, Palmer, Ketchikan and Juneau.

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