

[THIS IS AN UNEDITED REALTIME TRANSCRIPT. I AM A NATIONALLY-CERTIFIED CLOSED CAPTIONER, BUT THIS IS NOT A CERTIFIED TRANSCRIPT, IT IS TO BE USED FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY -- KATHY ROBSON]

>> TOM: Good morning everybody. And welcome to this week's incidents management team briefing for the Covid-19 incident. Today is Thursday April 23. My name is Tom Kohley, I'm the disaster and emergency services coordinator for Carbon County. With me is Scott Blain, County Commissioner for the Joliet District. He's also serving as our recovery group supervisor on the incident management team. Welcome, Scott.

>> SCOTT: Hello.

>> TOM: Again, this live feed is being broadcast through Facebook and Instagram. You are welcome to submit your comments during this live feed. We'll try to answer them as they come in. If we're not able to answer them or we just don't have time we'll post those later this week. A transcript of the recording will be available soon after the event. Thank you again to Kathy Robson for providing that service. Today we'll quickly do a quick overview of the state and local Covid-19 cases. Then we'll talk about what is on everybody's mind at this time, that's the reopening plan for the state of Montana. Scott is going to talk specifically about our recently formed recovery group here in Carbon County. So we'll go ahead and jump into the state cases. We have 442 confirmed cases in the state as of 10:00. Total of 14 fatalities and we have 13 active hospitalizations. Which is actually really good

news. This is the lowest number of hospitalizations per capita in the United States at this time. All our measures seem to be taking effect. We've had a downward trend in the last two weeks and the number of cases, which is also very good news. And we'll go ahead and move into the local situation here. New technology. Here in Carbon County, our current case, number of confirmed cases remains at 6. The map that you see behind me is a map showing the distribution of those cases. And the numbers represent a summary of those cases within each of the Commissioner Districts. In the Red Lodge District we have had a total of one case. In the Bridger District, two cases. And in the Joliet District three cases. This is not confined to one single area of the County, that it is distributed throughout the County. Again, of those six cases three of them have recovered. And just the fact that we're keeping the numbers at 6 currently, I think, is a shoutout to mostly our public health professionals. All of the efforts they put in, towards coordinating team people, isolating people, doing the contact tracing has been successful. I want to give a shoutout for the work they've been doing. That kind of wraps up the current situation. I think we'll just jump right into what most people want to hear about the recovery plan. Governor Bullock yesterday released his reopening the big sky, reopening plan for the state of Montana at noon. Again, this was a collective effort put together by public

health experts, healthcare providers, business leaders, and emergency management professionals.

I'm pleased to say that we had local representation that provided input for the plan. So we did have some voice in the construction of the plan.

Now there's a lot of elements to this plan.

There's actually three different documents, there is the plan itself, guidelines, and the Governor's directive.

A lot of reading material, I would encourage to you go to carbonalert.org, we have all three documents pointed there.

You will really want to dig into the first two, the plan and the guidelines to understand the specifics of the reopening plan.

I want to touch on a couple of high points of the plan.

This is a phased reopening consisting of three phases.

Throughout all three phases, there is, all elements have significant prevention measures.

And a lot of it goes back to what we've already been doing.

That include as continuation of the physical distancing, limited travel, good hygiene practices, disinfecting frequently-used objects and surfaces.

This will continue for quite some time.

I think really, we really need to change our mind set a little bit around this disease.

We've got to try and stop thinking of it, trying to end the virus, but to learn how to live with the virus moving forward.

This is going to go on quite some time.

Here in Carbon County, we have a large amount of travel across County and state lines for both work and recreation purposes.

Coordination with all of our neighbors will be Paramount.

That includes the city of Billings, Yellowstone County, Custer Gallatin national forest

and Yellowstone park.

The decisions they make has a large impact on what happens in Carbon County.

We will reach out to them as a priority.

The directive that the Governor put forth does not in any way inhibit is to present local public health authority from adapting more restrictive approaches based on local need. At this point we don't foresee doing that at any time.

But it is a tool within our tool box if we need to, with a plan flexible enough that allows us to implement those if needed.

Not directly related to the plan but I guess the process itself is that cases are projected to rise with the reopening of businesses.

There's going to be more social interaction, spreading of the virus will be more common, it's our role as the incident management team to monitor the situation, assist with protecting our most vulnerable populations and keep most importantly keep the cases manageable for our healthcare system.

Again, I won't have time to go into all the details of the plan.

I want to highlight a couple of important dates that are coming up for the next week or two.

April 26 -- let's see, the stay-at-home order is set to expire, set to expire this Friday.

The Governor has extended that through April 26.

So on April 26, stay-at-home directive will be lifted allowing individuals to travel about with certain restrictions. Places of worship will also be able to open on the 26th, Sunday.

Again, all of these openings are with strict physical distancing, increased disinfection guidelines, and for some people reduce capacity protocols

especially restaurants and retail businesses in accordance with state guidelines. Even though these things are happening we have to adhere to strict standards. Going back to the dates, April 27, retail businesses will be able to open. That includes most of our main street businesses. However other places of assembly, movie theaters, bowling alleys, music halls and the like shall remain closed during this phase one time. On May 4, a week from next Monday, restaurants, bars, breweries will all be able to open. Again there's some significant guidelines set forth in the plan. I would reference the guideline document that I mentioned earlier. But the bottom line is that there's going to be fairly significant changes in operations. The look and the feel of a restaurant is going to feel very different moving forward. I'm not going to go in to -- on May 7, schools may return to in-classroom instruction. Again, this will be at the discretion of the local District and the school boards to make that call. We're not really prepared to tell which ones are open at this time, or stay closed for the remainder of the school year, and continue to do distance learning. We'll let the schools announce that at the time. I'm not going to get into phase 2 or phase 3 much, with phase 2 gatherings will be expanded, talk about 50 people. Gyms and pools may open. Other places of assembly may open with group size restrictions, distancing. Under phase three, no limit to group size but vulnerable

populations can then begin to resume public interaction. There's really no timelines on any of these phases. The state will continuously monitor the situation and will tell us when we're able to move on to the next phase. One of the recent developments in the incident management team has been the development of the economic recovery group. We've been discussing this for quite some time. We realize there was a need as we move through this incident and so Scott Blain has taken the lead role, and put forth this team. So I'm going to turn it over to Scott and let him describe a little bit about what the mission of the group is. Understanding that it's fairly newly formed and there's still a lot of planning involved at this point. >> SCOTT: All right thanks, Tom. I guess I want to kind of start, too, with thanking especially our public health nurses and public health officer for stepping up during all of this stuff going on. And have a tremendous amount of workload even with the six cases we have. They've done a pretty good job of keeping us informed giving the incident management team insight on how to bunker through this. Recovery group is in a new phase. This a new challenge for everybody involved. Most of the people involved in this have a fire background. Fires rarely last this long and they're a lot more manageable, turns out. This has been a challenging process for everybody. I think part of the challenge is, and I've said it several times, there's two camps of people as we open up here. Camp of people excited and can't

believe we've waited this long and then there's a group of people that are still very concerned.

In Carbon County there's a lot of planning and thoughtful planning put in.

It's easy to be critical with hindsight vision.

We won't know as we open up, I kind of equate it to taking the training wheels off your kid's bike.

They'll never ride the bike if you don't take the training wheels off.

That's where we are at.

We don't know until we open up.

We don't know what's really going to happen.

As Tom said, we fully expect some numbers to go up and we have to recognize the difference, more testing or the process.

I think that there's a lot of anticipation in both camps as we go through this.

We did put together a really good team of people from all backgrounds in the County.

We want to get a geographic representation of the County.

I know you probably can't see that on Facebook.

But I will roll through the names real quick of people that have stepped up and virtually every one of these people were on our first meeting yesterday and via the virtual meeting.

We had a productive meeting for about 1:15 as we rolled through that.

Representing restaurant and bars, I have Hal ward and Tom Kuntz.

Hal has restaurants and bars in the Joliet-rock vale area.

Tom has restaurants and bars in Red Lodge.

Red Lodge mountain with Jeff Schmidt.

Kelly Evans representing the hospital.

Dr. Bill George is the public health officer.

Dakota Mitcham mayor of Joliet,

cliff Schultz mayor of Bridger, Dave Stauffer representing the city of Red Lodge, Shirley Miller mayor of Fromberg, Lars Hanson is a farm and rancher, ag lender at First Interstate Bank at Red Lodge.

Brian BRAJCICH commercial lender with bank of Red Lodge, commercial as well.

John Fitzgerald served as Superintendent of schools on this committee.

Leza Vargus, sells real estate out of Clark Fork Valley, Carla Lawrence representing agriculture through the Carbon County Farm Bureau.

Melissa Oswald is ag producer from Edgar.

Sam Smith representing the faith-based groups as a pastor out of Joliet.

Steve Simonson has been instrumental representing the Beartooth RC&D acts as liaison to Yellowstone County.

Tracy Timmons will represent the Red Lodge area community foundation.

Trish Eik, Joliet community development alliance.

And Sherry Weamer with the red lodge Chamber of commerce.

We have a diverse group from every part of the County, trying to get everybody represented.

The main mission statement, goal for that group, is to support and sustain our local economies during this time of economic distress and prepare the community for economic recovery and future growth and development.

That's what the goal, the primary goal of this group is.

I think our group learned a lot from each other yesterday, just learning the challenges that the bankers have had in the last two weeks and everyone else learning the challenges that our ag producers are going through and learning the challenges our bar and restaurant people have gone through and going forward how some of these want to continue

to operate.

Trying to just help to and advocate for each other and realize, if this group struggled with this program, here's how they fix those problems.

One of the things I found yesterday, I found really interesting, and I guess when we talk about who, what, when, where, why, why we need to do this, there was a group that did an economic analysis of the potential job loss counties across the United States.

If 100 being the average job loss, that we're expecting, Carbon County I'll start with Yellowstone County, Yellowstone County wrote a letter to the Governor proclaiming that they're going to be in big economic distress because they're at 17%.

They're going to experience a 17% greater than average job loss than the average County across the United States.

Carbon County is at 41% job loss increase compared to other counties in the United States.

You compare that to all of the other counties in Montana, only one County that has a significant amount of job loss projected over Carbon County. You can make that correlation with a lot of job loss is probably going to be directly related, perhaps, to whether or not the parks open up and our tourism relationships there.

In comparison, Clark County, Nevada, home of Las Vegas, is at 64%.

We're -- while Vegas is 100% tourism, we're pretty close to that same kind of economic distress.

We do have plans and people on this group have coordinated already with the forest service, national park services, fish, wildlife and parks down in the Joliet area.

Whether or not Cooney dam opens up is a huge impact to us.

I'd like to save some time for

questions, but just rolling through some of these possible questions we might have, you know, will there be different parts of the County that have different restrictions.

Talking with Dr. George yesterday, we don't perceive there will be a lot of differences across the County. But there will be differences in how establishments need to open up.

Some establishments can open up, and fully, they might not have 10 people on a busy night.

They might be fully open and back to somewhat normal.

Talking to restaurant owners and bar owners and other parts and establishments, they've made it clear they don't -- they can't open at half speed.

And maybe that has changed, maybe come up with a different plan.

They need all their tables in order to be profitable.

We'll work through some of those things as we phase through and learn what's working and what isn't.

One of the questions is what happens if we see a spike in cases and I think it's kind of one of them things, everyone fully expects there to be more cases as things open up.

But is it because we opened up or because we're testing more and try to be responsible that way.

We have had a great trend for weeks in Montana.

I think we anticipate seeing some of those trends continue.

One of the comments made was, you know, we've all seen the Walmart and home depot and Lowes in Billings, they're full.

From a medical standpoint, that may be a good indication that we're safe to open up some of this.

More safe to open up some of this stuff than originally thought a month ago.

One of the questions we might

have is what about second homeowners, visitors, tourists, how are we worried about them bringing the virus here.

One of the comments during our committee brought up yesterday, the focus may be to get in-state tourists.

To get people to visit Carbon County that haven't been here can enjoy the past and enjoy the things we have to offer.

I know the Chamber is working on that messaging, not just the local Chamber but the Montana Chamber of commerce as well.

We can open up for questions

>> TOM: I'll caveat the questioning that the plan is hot off the press, just released 12:00 yesterday.

We're still trying to grapple with the contents.

I have my highlighter and my tab notes, still trying to piece it together.

We'll do the best we can to find the right section of the plan if it's specific to the Montana plan.

>> Okay, some of the questions do center around the need to, if cases increase.

If cases increase, has the state addressed the possibility of needing to reverse the reopening?

And also, around are we able to, if the numbers go up, how will we ramp up our response in Carbon County.

>> SCOTT: Well, I think from this perspective, one of the notes I have, is, again, we expect some cases to increase.

>> SCOTT: We have to make sure that our hospitals have the capacity to safely treat all the patients, both people with Covid-19 and other conditions. Especially in the rural areas like where we're at.

Making sure we have the capacity to test all of the people.

Dr. George says we will have increased capacity to test people.

One of the things we know now, a month after this, that the recovery rate seems to be better than what was initially thought. As long as we have a sustained reduction of new cases over 14 days and the hospitals can treat everybody, I expect we'll probably continue down this path and not open to new phases if the cases become unmanageable at a local level.

>> TOM: I think we'll have to continue to monitor, but at a greater granularity within the County, to watch where the cases will emerge and if there's any clustering of the cases.

As I mentioned before, the plan doesn't prohibit us from implementing more restrictive guidelines if needed.

That's, again, a tool that we have available to us.

But the primary goal at this point is prevent the resurgence of the virus.

We will be most definitely watch that as close as possible.

>> SCOTT: I think, you know if I speak for that other camp, what we haven't had a resurgence, we never had a surge I think you could say.

And I think you can attribute, we made drastic measures across the state.

I go back to the training wheels.

We've operated this way for a month, five weeks now, and that's why we probably didn't have a surge.

When we start opening back up we may see some of that.

We have to be able to manage it at our hospitals.

>> The next questions center around vulnerable populations. So the read is for phase one and phase two, nothing really changes for vulnerable populations and recommended that people still observe the stay-at-home order, isolation. Is that an accurate read.

Along those lines, will special hours for those vulnerable

populations including 65 and older at grocery stores and other establishments still be encouraged.

>> SCOTT: I'm going to guess it's probably up to the individual grocery store. How they want to manage their grocery store.

Yeah, I believe that's correct phase one, phase two prohibits visiting nursing homes and hospitals.

That's not going to occur in phase three.

We don't have an idea what day that's going to be

>> TOM: What are the other elements of the question?

>> For those 65 and older and other vulnerable populations between phase 1 and phase 2, the thought was that it's still encouraged that they maintain that isolation, keep away from people.

>> TOM: That is a correct read, during phase 1 and phase 2.

They will be prohibiting any visitation at most of those establishments.

The long-term care facilities, the nursing homes, that's our read on it at this point.

>> Will the Carbon County incident management team be helping out with grocery deliveries and essentials

>> TOM: Yes, absolutely, along with the increased cases we'll see the need for delivery of essential services, being provided through one of our groups and the incident management team and other local churches and faith-based organizations providing that service.

We expect to see an increase in that.

>> A question about the committee, it's a great group of leaders.

Sherry Weamer has asked to please add the Red Lodge Chamber to those listed community members.

I think you did that under Tom

Kuntz.

The question about a person from the retail industry being represented.

>> SCOTT: Yeah, I tried to get people that wore several hats. That's why I purposely picked Ryan Brajcich, he wears multiple hats, his wife has retail space in Red Lodge.

Being commercial lender he has a pretty good ear to those folks. As you might imagine, the meeting with 0 to 30 people in the room is challenging on the phone and the computer makes it more challenging.

I've had a lot of people want to listen in and we're open to that but we just have to keep it somewhat manageable.

With 22 people I think it is, it's pretty difficult to make it through what we need to in a timely fashion.

>> Big question for the group, will there be a 4th of July parade.

>> SCOTT: Well, that I have down here as one of the questions. What about the 4th of July, the rodeo, Jim Bridger days, Carbon County fair.

Those are huge questions. Under the Governor's directions they're going to be difficult to function the way they have in the past until there's an opening of phase 3.

Again, no idea, you know, it's all going to depend on how our trends go through this phase 1. On the rodeo side of things, the PRCA is leaving it up to local jurisdictions to decide whether or not at this point, which it may change, at this point leaving it up to local jurisdictions.

The fourth of July rodeo parade is the big thing looming out there right now.

I think speaking for the representation of the people in the Red Lodge community especially, opening up too fast if that even dangers the rest of the -- endangers the rest of the

summer.
Month ago they wanted to get it over as soon as possible we could so we could still have a normal summer season.
Hopefully we can still have some version and fashion of that.
It's certainly not going to be the same as it's been in the past.
Quite Frankly, there's going to be people that won't travel to be tourists any more, at least this summer.
We don't have a good answer for that.
I know the fair is one thing that has been talked about a lot.
There's been virtual fairs.
The fair can maybe operate with social distancing.
There are plans with the fair board in place to try to figure out how to do stuff like that.
>> Great.
A question about this economic group.
It seems to be a good idea.
Is this something that you see continuing for years to come, something like this economic recovery group.
>> SCOTT: Yeah, and me and Tom have talked about that.
This group probably will meet long after the medical side of the group might be meeting.
The economic impacts are going to be for probably unfortunately a really long time.
Half joking, I hope that the carbon alert page in July is talking about fires and other emergencies rather than Covid-19.
That would be a good sign if we're talking about something else.
This committee, perhaps, may be a long-lasting committee that meets somewhat regularly.
>> TOM: To that end, I think Scott maybe you want to touch upon some of the resources or maybe the pooling of resources into a consolidated site that people can refer to.

>> SCOTT: We want to get everything into one website, so everybody has the resources that they need to find in one spot.
And we have established that website, it's not public yet, we're still working on it.
Yellowstone County has a great website if you're anxious to look at something right now.
Most of that, it's going to be the same as it is in Carbon County.
We might have a few more specific things tailored to Carbon County.
We will have something similar to what Yellowstone County is doing with all of the resources.
The people on this commit, I've asked them to come up with the resources that are out there for ag producers that are out there for restaurants in our small business type people.
And resources that might be out there through the community foundation.
And local governments just try to put all of these resources into one place so somebody can go there and hopefully get as many answers as they can rather than them having to stop five different places.
We will get a website up at some point hopefully soon.
>> This is an economic recovery group.
Are you looking to address other needs within the community to recover?
>> TOM: I'll start off with that one.
Obviously recovery encompass as lot more than just the economic needs at the time.
There's social, there's mental health issues, all of these things we're well aware of.
The driving force is the economic recovery.
That's why Scott has pulled together this group.
I think also there have been a number of other entities around the County and in the state that stepped up to fill some of those

gaps.

A couple that come to mind is the Red Lodge area community foundation to assist nonprofits that are going through these difficult times.

Mental health America of Montana has put out, I think bolstered their Montana recovery warmline, virtual drop-in centers that you can talk about some of your mental health issues with them. Other groups have stepped up to the plate to provide those services.

Right now for the time being we're focusing mostly on the economic recovery.

>> SCOTT: I'll add to that, before this meeting yesterday at 3:00 I was on a phone conference where we were talking specifically about an opportunity for some funding for increased mental health. So there were several of us on that call.

That's going to be a real thing after all this.

People that were already having some mental health problems because of financial situations, this certainly hasn't made things better for them.

I did ask the sheriff a few days ago has he seen an increase in some of that stuff.

His comment was not any more than normal yet.

So we're very aware that there are some other recovery type things that may occur.

And locally we are working on some of that mental health stuff.

I'm on the south central Montana regional mental health center board and work with some folks in I think it's 12 counties through that organization. Something we'll keep an eye on as well.

>> TOM: And the board consists of members from places of worship, the hospital, the schools.

I think some of those other concerns may trickle in to this

group as well.

>> SCOTT: Yes.

One thing and I don't know how many more questions you have, but a couple of facts I just wanted to share with peep things I find interesting.

Our bankers talked about in the last 10 days they've done 35 years worth of loans if the small business association equivalent, 35 years of loans. The bank of Bridger and First Interstate Bank in our County combined have done approximately \$10 million worth of payroll protection and SBA stuff.

If you figure that dollar is turned over five to six, seven times we're talking \$50 million, \$60 million worth of direct stimulus as we exchange our money over and over in the County.

Some of that is going to get spent out of the County, too, unfortunately.

\$1.2 billion in the state of Montana, a week ago.

There's just a lot of resources out there.

And I know they increased the funding for some of the payroll protection and SBA yesterday in Congress.

A lot of the people that were sitting there waiting to reapply should be first in line this time.

Hopefully the people that missed out last time will get a chance to go through that program this time.

>> Two more questions then we'll wrap up.

You mentioned fires in July. Will firefighters get some kind of extra screening with the possibility of Covid and fire damaging lungs?

>> TOM: Hmm.

Well this fire season is going to look a little different, for sure.

I've been in contact with the department of natural resources and conservation, the fire bureau, talking to Derek Yager

in Billings.

I think extra precautions will go throughout the fire service, extra precautions, trying to keep fires at a very minimal size, initial attack is huge. We'll increase, bolster our fire resources to jump on fires as soon as possible.

The question was referring to --

>> Extra screening for firefighters

>> TOM: I'm sure there will be, especially in the cases where we have what we call extended attacks where we have to fight fires for multiple days.

Fire camps are going to look entirely different from what they once were.

Yes, a lot of additional precautions in the fire industry.

>> Where do motels, hotels, and vacation rentals factor into those phased reopenings?

>> SCOTT: I don't have a good answer for that without looking more deep.

The hotels have been allowed to stay open.

I don't think they're getting any reservations, would be the challenging part.

People wanting to visit is going to be the hurdle they have to get over rather than the opening.

As a County and correct me if I'm wrong we have not prohibited vacation rentals and hotels being open.

It was discussed at one point.

I mean we recognize that some of our hotels have residents that that's their permanent home for weeks or months at a time.

> TOM: I don't believe any restrictions every been put in. Moving forward they will have to adhere to the same distancing standards within their staff and their guests, the sanitation protocols and all that.

We probably should look into that a little further and put forth a solid answer on that.

I didn't see a lot of reference

to hotels and motels in the Governor's plan.

>> And as we wrap up, is there something that you'd just like to leave us with at the end of this briefing?

>> SCOTT: I was just, one of the things I know one of the big things out there for the parents at home maybe watching is the schools.

I would just reach out to your Superintendents, they're probably getting hit up plenty, reach out to the school boards and figure out what direction your school is going to go. The conversation I have had with a couple of the superintendents I have had is we have to realize, and I think this is the same for all of our businesses, our goal, we have to realize what the goal is.

Our goal, if our goal is to open up as quickly as possible with complete disregard to everything, it may have a detrimental effect, And we may have to start back at zero again.

I think the schools' goals with a lot of them I have talked to their goal is to be open in August.

Doing what they're doing right now to be responsible enough to be open in August is their goal. I think, you know, that's the goal for a lot of the business when is we get open we want to stay open.

That's the long-term goal.

I believe we'll get there.

Life is going to be different for a while.

As Dr. George said a million times we have to learn to live with the virus.

It's not going to be gone any time soon until there's a vaccine and we have more testing.

I like the idea of getting after it and let's see what we can accomplish.

Again, there's the two camps. Some of us might sit in both of them.

It's just a balancing act of trying to get all of our goals accomplished.

Ultimately keep people safe.

That's not just medically safe but economically safe.

That's the goal -- my committee's goal is to get the economy going.

> TOM: I think that sums it up pretty well.

It's a paradigm shift we're going through trying to live with this virus.

I'm confident that the creativity of our County residents, event planners will come up with creative solutions to keep our traditions, our lively hoods, things we like to enjoy while living in Carbon County keep them moving forward. We may have to dampen it down for a season or two.

But I'm sure that with the creative folks we have in place we'll get through this.

>> SCOTT: I'd like to close with, when we do open up, I don't want -- my hope is everybody doesn't get in their car and drive to Yellowstone County and spend your money in Yellowstone County.

Our businesses when they open up here and grocery stores and gas stations, they've been open through all of this.

But please go visit your local business store owners and buy local, and try to help out our local business owners and not take all of our money right down the road to Yellowstone County.

That includes if you have the opportunity to buy food from a local farmer, rancher, that's shopping local too.

I would encourage you all to do that.

And be diligent to keep our County going.

With that I'd just want to thank everybody for the opportunity to be here today.

>> TOM: Thank you very much.

We'll plan on tuning in next Thursday, 10:00, same time.