

An Indoor Winter Camp in the Cool and Rain of Western Washington

COVID Protocols and Outcomes, 12/30/22 to 1/2/23

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Northwest New Year's Camp (NWNYC), aka, The Bash on Vashon (www.BashonVashon.org) is a "Do it Ourselves" wintertime dance and music camp for all ages (6 months - 86 years) on the cool and rainy western shore of Washington State's Vashon Island in Puget Sound. Camp has been held since 1994 at Camp Sealth, a 100-year-old Camp Fire camp. Many wonderful musicians and callers have made NWNYC their New Year's destination through the years, often giving up paid gigs to do so. We provide professional sound equipment and support to ensure that callers and musicians can be heard well. Camper-led workshops include contra and English dance, as well as music, crafts, juggling, and many other activities, including a camper concert. The beach-front location offers tidal flat hikes and views of local wildlife, such as bald eagles, sea otters and orcas.

Virus management has become an important part of in-person folk events and we are cautiously rediscovering which folk activities we now can and cannot do safely. The FDA and the CDC have issued guidelines as to how we should use vaccines, masks, and home tests for Covid. However, these guidelines are fairly general, and don't cover specific activities such as contradances or folk camps, where dancing is aerobic, and we may be breathing heavily just inches away from many other people's faces. At a winter camp, all our dining and dancing are done indoors. We are writing to share some of the virus management efforts we used to help keep NWNYC campers safe, while enjoying the activities we love.

NWNYC had something of a pandemic preview at our 2019/2020 Camp. Our introduction to 2020 involved a virulent strain of norovirus that spread rapidly on the last night of camp. More than 100 out of our 155 campers (70%) experienced norovirus symptoms, some mild and some drastically unpleasant. An aid car was called to camp for one individual who collapsed after using the toilet. Four additional campers, two kiddos and two adults, were seen in emergency rooms for rehydration and care.

NWNYC attendees that year included organizers of dance and music events in Washington and Oregon, including the two weekly Seattle Contradances. When the SARS-COV2 pandemic arrived in Washington in late February, local dance organizers were primed and keenly aware of the consequences of a highly transmissible disease. Organizers reacted quickly, cancelling weekly dances and events such as the Cascade Promenade, Supersonic Dance Weekend, the Portland Roadhouse, the Portland Megaband dance, and the Northwest Folklife Festival.

SARS-COV2 vaccines were released in late 2020. When the vaccination rate reached a high enough level in Washington State, local dance organizers began to hold events in mid-2021. Regular contradancing started up again in 2021, with a pause for the Delta variant but not for the subsequent Omicron wave.

We would especially like to credit Sherry Nevins, organizer of the Lake City Contra Dance in Seattle. Sherry spent many hours consulting with the King County Public Health Department

and community healthcare providers concerning health risks specific to contra dancing, and how to help keep our community safe. As a result, Seattle has some of the most cautious Covid protocols for contradances in the US. All dancers are required to wear good quality masks and provide proof of vaccination with at least one booster; dancers are encouraged to have all boosters for which they are eligible. Weekly reminders are sent to dancers, asking them to confidentially report symptoms or positive tests. Results are reported, without identifying individuals, on the dance website and by email to all attendees. There has been no known transmission of Covid at our Thursday or Friday night contra dances.

2022/2023 NWNYC Camp

NWNYC was not held in 2020 or 2021, due to concerns about holding an indoor dance event during the pandemic. In September 2022, the NWNYC committee surveyed prior campers for their thoughts on holding camp.

One third of those surveyed said they would not come if Covid restrictions were too stringent. Another third either said they would not come at all or would not come if Covid protocols were too lax. We aimed for the middle third and sent a letter saying: here is what our protocols will be; please register (without paying) so we can see if enough people would come to make it worthwhile. We wanted between 40 and 80 campers, about one-third to one-half our usual number, which would allow us to house smaller numbers in cabins, as well as space campers further apart while eating. About fifty had signed up by the end of October, when we made the decision to “go”. We ultimately had approximately 70 campers.

Another letter was sent asking people to make their payments and finalize their registration. We were generous with refunds, both for illness and for those who lost their nerve after hearing about outbreaks at other camps.

OUR PROTOCOL:

- Verification of two primary doses of an mRNA vaccine or one dose of J&J, and at least one booster.
- We strongly recommended one bivalent booster. No exceptions were made to this requirement. Campers self-selected according to their comfort with this.
- Proof of a negative home antigen test within 6 hours of arrival at camp. - A six-hour window was allowed for campers flying from out of state. All others tested within one or two hours.
- Campers identified others with whom they would feel comfortable in shared housing. All housing was assigned prior to arrival. This change was warmly received. Our housing coordinator worked hard in preparation; and campers reported feeling less stress, knowing their housing was pre-assigned.
- We required good quality masks such as N95, KN95, or KF94. Cloth masks and valved masks were not permitted. Masks were to be worn at all times indoors unless one was actively eating or drinking, or when in assigned sleeping accommodations. We made brief exceptions for wind instruments and dance callers.
- We encouraged everyone to gently remind each other if masks were not in place or were worn incorrectly. We assumed the best of each other, and assumed someone was simply distracted if a mask slipped or if they had forgotten to put it back on.

- To reduce the risk of transmission of norovirus, we reminded campers to wash their hands frequently, including before serving themselves in the buffet line and again before sitting down to eat. Fewer campers and shorter lines at the sinks made this easier.
- Spacing: We set up the dining area with six seats per table instead of the usual twelve.
- We limited registration to about 50% of our usual 160 campers.
- To reduce the amount of airborne virus, dust, and smoke particles in Rounds Hall (the main hall for dining, dancing, crafts, and fireplace), we set up four Corsi-Rosenthal air filter boxes.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corsi-Rosenthal_Box). A Corsi-Rosenthal box is a DIY air filter with similar filtration efficacy to commercial HEPA filters; we estimated that our four boxes could filter the entire hall volume every 30-40 minutes. The boxes were quiet and did not interfere with any of the hall activities. The filters were white at the beginning of the week, and noticeably brown by the end of camp. We discarded the filters in sealed plastic bags at the end of camp and will use the box fans to build new filter units for future dance events.

HOW DID IT GO?

- Everyone tested negative six hours or less prior to entry on Friday. We checked time-stamped photos, and some tested at the gate before entry. We had 100% confirmed negative tests.
- One person tested negative on Friday, and then developed some mild symptoms late Friday night, which they attributed to allergies. They took their allergy meds. On Saturday morning they still had mild symptoms. They ate breakfast in the dining hall as usual but not lunch. They decided on their own to test again on Saturday afternoon, and tested positive. After this positive test result, they informed an organizer and drove home alone.
- After some consideration, the two NW Camp organizers, the Camp Sealth liaison, and two physicians present at camp emptied Rounds Hall (the main hall for dining, dancing, crafts, and fireplace) and required another negative test from everyone prior to the evening dancing. 100% of campers provided a current negative test.
- We moved one of the Corsi-Rosenthal boxes into the cabin where the Covid positive camper had stayed and ran the filter 24 hours/day.
- Sunday morning before breakfast we required another test and 100% of campers provided a negative test result. Sunday evening before dinner required another test and 100% of campers tested negative.
- Campers were supportive of the additional testing. Camp Sealth provided bulk tests they had in stock. Testing campers four times would have been cost-prohibitive if we had needed to purchase retail.
- Monday morning testing was optional. Camp was empty as planned by about 2 pm (most had left by about noon or 1pm).
- On 1/9/23 a post-camp email was sent, which again requested that campers please report symptoms and/or a positive test result to the organizers.
- More than a month after camp, we have had no reports of other positive tests or symptomatic cases. Individuals who had the highest exposure (sharing a cabin) continued testing after camp. Although the camper who had slept nearest the positive

camper had some mild sore throat and fatigue, they also repeatedly tested negative during and several days after camp.

In conclusion, despite the presence of a Covid positive individual on Saturday, there appears to have been no transmission from that camper to any other campers. The campers appreciated our cautious approach and were supportive of our protocol. This same protocol should also be effective in reducing camp transmission of other common airborne viruses, such as influenza and respiratory syncytial virus.

Authors:

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Melissa Coffey is the NWNYC Committee Chair and is also a nurse at the hospital with the first acknowledged SARS-COV2 (aka Covid-19) death in the US, February 28, 2020.

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