

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 Port Townsend, Washington. Charlie Bermant with a special COVID-19 report for 3/12/2020.

US representative Derek Kilmer is in Washington today waiting for action on the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Inbetween votes, he called KPTZ to discuss the bill and the ramifications of COVID-19.

Kilmer: "The bill is called the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, and the plan still to pass it today, but obviously things are always fluid in our nation's capital. Part of the reason that our office has been really active in pushing out some of the guidance for that from the Centers for Disease Control is that each of us has a role to play in protecting public health – you know: the guidance around washing your hands and around using hand sanitizer; and for those who are able to telecommute, trying to take advantage of those opportunities; cleaning surfaces. It's easy to sort-of snicker at those things but those can actually bend the curve in terms of how much exposure people have to that."

Bermant: Democrats and Republicans aren't on the same page when it comes to the coronavirus battle.

Kilmer: "There are components of this bill that are undeniably no brainers and yet part of the reason it hasn't been voted on yet is there has been some pushback from the White House regarding some of the provisions and so that's being negotiated in real time. While you and I are talking I think they're trying to work. There are provisions in this that the folks I represent can't wait for. You're already seeing some school closures. One of the things this bill does is it make sure that kids who depend on school free and reduced price meals are still able to have access to nutritious food even if their school closes. That's important because unfortunately we're seeing, for example, the Seattle public schools just shut. And we may see more school districts that follow."

Bermant: While Kilmer appreciates the administration's efforts in fighting COVID-19, he hopes they take a scientific approach.

Kilmer: "I think it's really important that the decisions that get made are made based on science, that they are made based on guidance from our public health officials. I really appreciate the approach that Governor Inslee has taken because he's been joined at the hip with the Department of Health and with our public health professionals in each step that gets taken. My continued encouragement to the administration has been is to make sure that we're putting science and public health front center and all of the decisions that get made."

Bermant: Kilmer said that we are now at a point where we can make a difference in the spread of the virus.

Kilmer: "Part of the reason you're seeing aggressive action is we can bend the trajectory of this to try to contain it insofar as possible. You can in essence bend the curve on how many people get this because in the absence of action there is the potential for really exponential growth of people getting coronavirus. That's not fair Kilmer saying that. I'm not an epidemiologist. That's public health professionals who are saying that and in me speaking to that. So what you don't want to do is wait till it's on your doorstep and an emergency for everybody, to declare an emergency. Because at that at that point you have a lot of the things that you would do to prevent this and to bend the curve down. A lot of that you're too late. I think it's why you've seen at the state level and multiple counties declare an emergency. My sense is – and again this should be driven by public health professionals – as continued evidence of expansion of this occurs, it makes sense to make sure all hands are on deck. And if national declaration helps get more resources out the door then I think that would be prudent."

Bermant: After recording this comment this morning Kilmer called us back and said that under an emergency declaration the resources marshalled to fight the virus would be considerable.

Kilmer: “I think it is possible both to protect people's civil liberties and to protect public health. You know I think you are seeing in the case of the governor and the restrictions in King, Snohomish, and Pierce counties a limitation on large crowds. You know one of the things he said was it's not like we're going to go arrest people if they go to a large church service. But we all have to recognize that each of us has a role to play in trying to contain this and trying to limit people's exposure to it.”

Bermant: Once the crisis is past Kilmer feels we could develop some better habits.

Kilmer: “So there's an impact on everyday Americans in terms of actions we all can take. My hope is that some of the guidance that's been provided by the CDC is things that we all embrace on a more consistent basis. So yes I hope is the short answer. But beyond that I think this is identifying some of the shortcomings in our systems. My hope is one of the take aways is that the federal government has from all of this is a greater focus on getting out ahead of some of these issues before they become problems.”

This is Charlie Bermant for KPTZ news please check back to KPTZ for more with our conversations with congressman Derek Kilmer.