Our Plan to Ramp Up Testing

As communities work their way back to normal, one of the tools in our fight against COVID-19 that we will continue to ramp up is mass testing. Earlier this week, Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon laid out our plan to conduct testing events over the next four weeks.

First, we'll test our most vulnerable population: residents and staff at nursing homes and connected assisted living centers. The first week will focus on the approximately 7,400 individuals at nursing homes in counties with substantial community spread. Week two will be nursing homes in all other counties, roughly another 10,200 South Dakotans. Then, weeks 3 and 4 will focus on the remaining assisted living centers, approximately 4,300 folks for each of those weeks.

Though we still have some finalizing to do, none of this could be possible without the nursing home and assisted living industry. I want to thank them; they have been fantastic in helping with the planning for this testing. We expect these next four weeks will be a heavy lift, but it's important that we try and identify whether the virus has found its way into these vulnerable facilities, so we can work to slow its spread.

Second, we'll also conduct mass testing in some of our tribal communities. For a variety of reasons, these folks could also be among the most vulnerable population as well, and we want to do everything we can to inhibit the spread in tribal communities. Our first event will be on the Lake Traverse Reservation with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe, and this will be conducted jointly with North Dakota.

Third, we'll also continue to work with employers of essential and critical infrastructure. As a reminder, South Dakota first conducted mass testing in connection to the reopening of the Smithfield Foods facility in Sioux Falls – a critical infrastructure business. Thanks to the tremendous collaboration between the State Department of Health and Avera Health, we were able to test roughly 3,700 Smithfield employees and their families over a four-day period. This testing did produce an uptick in positive cases this week, but that was expected. Finding these positives is a good thing because it means that we can isolate these individuals, get them home, and get them healthy.

Please know that this testing will not replace the testing of symptomatic individuals—that will continue without interruption. Also, it's important to remember that mass testing is point-in-time specific—that means it's a snapshot of the situation at a given moment. If someone tests negative today, they may still contract the virus tomorrow. Because of this, testing is not a silver bullet in the fight against COVID-19, but it does help us understand the situation at a given time and isolate those who test positive.

With the science, facts, and data driving our decision-making, we will continue to adapt to this virus and the threat it brings to our state. Thank you, South Dakotans, for your continued diligence in this effort. Together, we will get through this.