DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH STEPS UP TESTING FOR COVID-19: ABOUT 200 TESTS TO BE CONDUCTED EACH WEEK

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HONOLULU — Hawaii is shifting its COVID-19 response efforts into higher gear this week by launching a statewide surveillance testing program to identify cases of community spread of the coronavirus. This additional layer of testing helps detect COVID-19 cases earlier so that appropriate steps can be taken to contain the virus.

Community spread is defined as cases that cannot be traced back to a traveler or to those who came in contact with a person who has coronavirus.

About 200 COVID-19 tests will be conducted each week under the new program. Samples collected for influenza testing from patients with respiratory symptoms will be randomly selected and also tested for COVID-19. These samples are collected by healthcare providers in doctor's offices and other outpatient settings. The information will help responders understand the scope of such a spread when it occurs.

"This is a major new development in our state's prevention and mitigation efforts," said Bruce Anderson, Director of Health. "We've been asking for this capability and working with the CDC for weeks to get this program in the field. It will help us focus our prevention and response efforts so that we can keep our communities safe and informed about how the virus is affecting our state."

The Department of Health (DOH) is partnering with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to implement the additional testing. Hawaii is one of many jurisdictions throughout the country that is implementing the program.

Anderson said the tests, which will be conducted by the DOH's State Laboratories Division in Pearl City, will enable the state to identify and notify persons who test positive and take additional actions to try to stop the spread of the virus. DOH will contact the provider and patient in the event of a positive result and provide further guidance.

The Department of Health's State Laboratories Division is expected to receive up to 400 samples per week from participating healthcare providers and will randomly select and test 200 of these for COVID-19 testing. A sample involves taking swabs from the back of the nose or throat of patients with flu-like symptoms such as fever, coughing, or shortness of breath.

Anderson noted that this new surveillance testing program is being conducted in addition to ongoing testing for Persons Under Investigation (PUI) that is already taking place throughout the state.

A PUI is a person who meets the following criteria: has fever and cough or shortness of breath, has traveled to a location that has been affected by the virus, and whose healthcare provider has consulted a disease investigator with the DOH's Disease Outbreak Control Division.

Hawaii received its COVID-19 laboratory test materials from the CDC in early February and was unable to conduct testing because of defects in the materials received. The DOH State Laboratories Division staff worked closely with the CDC around the clock to complete the validation process and receive approval from the CDC to move forward with the testing procedure in Hawaii on Feb. 28 using the federal criteria for selecting samples for testing. On March 5, the CDC expanded the criteria for testing to include persons with symptoms who had traveled to areas outside of China with known spread of COVID-19. Physicians work with DOH to determine testing of patients who meet the criteria for prioritized testing for COVID-19.

If you have general questions about coronavirus, call 2-1-1 or text 877-275-6569. For the latest information on COVID-19 in Hawaii, visit health.hawaii.gov/covid19. For national information and resources, go to coronavirus.gov (http://coronavirus.gov/) .

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