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News Release
September 17, 2020

State launches 4-week push to increase access to “no barrier” COVID-19 testing

Testing effort is response to increased community spread statewide and will be free and open to all, with or without symptoms

Responding to increased levels of community spread of COVID-19 statewide, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) will launch a four-week effort to provide increased access to “no barrier” COVID-19 testing in communities across the state, beginning the week of Sept. 21. State health officials will work with local health officials and other community partners to offer free COVID-19 testing in multiple communities each week, with four to six separate community testing events spread throughout the state each week. Testing will be free, available to anyone who feels they need to be tested whether they have symptoms or not, and will not require insurance.

“The troublesome trends in our neighboring states are a reminder of how quickly we could go from walking the cliff’s edge to tumbling over it,” said MDH Commissioner Jan Malcolm. “We are deeply concerned about the spike of cases in communities all over the state where people don’t know how they contracted the virus. Community spread driven by people who don’t know they have it puts those most vulnerable to the worst complications at grave risk. It’s more critical than ever to test a lot of people and identify positive cases early to slow that spread. Testing lets us know who needs to isolate and who else may be at risk.”

The first week of targeted testing will occur in Grand Rapids, Pine City and Waseca. The locations for subsequent events are still being identified and will be communicated in the coming days. Health officials are using testing data to identify communities that are experiencing workplace clusters, are close to bordering states, or haven’t yet had larger-scale testing offered. This strategy will help increase the geographic balance of testing across Minnesota and respond where the health risk is greatest.

“Our state’s already strong testing capacity is allowing us to be proactive in our testing strategy,” said Kris Ehresmann, infectious disease director at MDH. “With this targeted push, we’re able to identify clusters of cases - whether they’re from weddings, funerals, backyard BBQs, Labor Day activities, going back to school, or being in the workplace, intervening now will prevent further spread and outbreaks.”

Testing will be done with a nasal swab, processed either by Mayo Clinic Laboratories or the University of Minnesota, through the lab capacity created by the testing partnership.

“This partnership has really been the key to our state’s ability to more accurately track the spread of the infection and keep Minnesotans safe,” said Dan Huff, MDH assistant commissioner for health protection. “This four-week testing ramp up is a continuation of that strategy. Because of that partnership, we’re able to offer this testing with no barriers in place. It means all are welcome - no cost, no IDs, no insurance, and those who are asymptomatic but have reason to think they should be tested. This effort will provide a bridge until mid-October, when Minnesotans will have additional access to testing through the opening of semi-permanent saliva testing locations.”

The National Guard will be activated to provide some staffing and logistical support for the increased testing push. The Guard was previously activated for testing at long-term care facilities.

“We’re grateful for the National Guard’s assistance in this effort,” said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division manager. “They are our neighbors and family members and live in our communities. They know as well as anyone how important our communities’ efforts to combat COVID-19 are. We’re optimistic this testing will help inform those people who may be at risk, so they can isolate before further spreading the virus. We know testing is one of our best strategies to keeping businesses and schools open.”

Widespread access to testing followed by isolating those who are positive, and quarantining close contacts is a proven strategy for controlling spread and keeping businesses and schools open as much as possible going into the fall.

This testing effort aligns with CDC guidelines that provide that state and local health officials may seek testing of asymptomatic individuals under certain circumstances to help control community spread. While many who contract COVID-19 may experience mild or even no symptoms, some suffer life-threatening complications, while an unknown percentage may suffer from life-long complications including heart and brain damage. All who contract the virus are contagious. In addition to combating existing levels of disease spread, this testing will provide important data to guide future efforts to combat COVID-19 and protect those who are most vulnerable to serious complications.

Week one of targeted testing push calendar

Itasca County

Sept. 23
10 a.m.-6 p.m.
Itasca County Fairgrounds
1336 Fairgrounds Rd, Grand Rapids
Drive-thru
Registration link: Itasca County Community COVID-19 Testing: Schedule Appointment (https://www.primarybio.com/r/itasca)

Pine County

Sept. 23-24
12-6 p.m.
Pine City Armory
1305 Main St, Pine City
Walk-up
Registration link: Pine City Community COVID-19 Testing: Schedule Appointment (https://www.primarybio.com/r/pinecity)

Waseca County

Sept. 23-24
12-6 p.m.
Waseca County Fairgrounds
4-H building #6
409 8th Ave NE
Waseca, MN 56093
Walk-up
Registration link: Waseca Community COVID-19 Testing: Schedule Appointment (https://www.primarybio.com/r/waseca)

Ramsey County

Sept. 24-25
2-6 p.m.
Mt. Olivet Baptist Church
451 Central Ave W
St. Paul, MN 55103
Registration link: Mt Olivet Baptist Church Community COVID-19 Testing: Schedule Appointment (https://www.primarybio.com/r/mtolivet)

-MDH-

Minnesota Helpline:

For questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, call 651-297-1304 or 1-800-657-3504.

Mental Health Crisis Line - Call: **CRISIS (**274747)

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