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Governor Bullock Outlines Framework to Ramp up Montana's Testing Capacity

Governor Bullock lays out testing protocols, establishes strike teams

MONTANA – Governor Steve Bullock today outlined a framework to ramp up testing capacity in Montana over the next several months with a goal to eventually conduct 60,000 tests per month and prioritize testing for vulnerable Montanans in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, tribal communities, and those with COVID-19 symptoms.

"As we enter phase one, we are committed to further ramping up our testing capacity in the state," Governor Bullock said. **"Among our core preparedness responsibilities is ensuring our ability to test symptomatic people for COVID-19 and trace contacts of COVID positive results, which we have been doing effectively. Additionally, we are ramping up efforts to support testing for vulnerable Montanans, our tribal communities, and those with COVID-19 symptoms as we continue to suppress the virus."**

"Montana's nursing homes and assisted living facilities have worked tirelessly to protect our vulnerable seniors during this very challenging time and we welcome and appreciate Governor Bullock's initiative to assure availability of testing for our staff and residents. There is widespread support for this effort among our facilities and we are happy to collaborate in every way we can," said Rose Hughes, Executive Director, Montana Health Care Association.

"We appreciate the governor's support for tribal sovereignty and partnership in protecting tribal communities. We are vigilant in our efforts to keep our communities safe and the testing approach outlined by the governor will help support our efforts," said President Andrew Werk of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council.

"This testing framework will provide the support needed for our Montana citizens, moreover, this will provide our nurse practitioner and physician led, independent rural health care clinics, the ability to provide the much needed care directly to those patients. This allows these rural patients to receive healthcare within their rural communities," said Vicky Byrd, Chief Executive Officer, Montana Nurses Association.

Governor Bullock also established five strike teams made up of a certified nurse and National Guard Members to be deployed across Montana to respond to COVID-19 cases in nursing homes and long term care facilities or to provide training and assistance with proper infectious disease control protocols as requested.

Using funds from the CARES Act, Governor Bullock is establishing a $5 million grant program available to local health departments, tribal public health, and urban Indian clinics to enhance existing COVID-19 contact tracing programs, support local businesses in developing plans to safely reopen and adhere to social distancing guidelines, and increase education or enforcement activity.

The testing framework outlined by Governor Bullock will be supported by both federal and private partnerships. The federal government recently committed to supplying states with 12.7 million swabs each month beginning in May.

Last week the state received 5,000 swabs from FEMA and 10,000 more swabs on Tuesday to begin ramping up testing. Another 7,000 swabs from FEMA are expected to arrive this week. Governor Bullock also sourced an additional 3,000 swabs from a private vendor that arrived this week.

With a consistent supply chain of swabs and other testing materials such as reagents, Montana can quickly scale up its ability to test. The state lab will prioritize processing tests for those experiencing symptoms related to COVID-19 and will continue to have a quick turnaround. Other testing devices could include the rapid Abbott machines, equipment in hospitals, and partnerships with private labs will assist the state in boosting capacity.

Testing protocols will be scaled based upon availability of swabs and other testing supplies. Anyone with one or more symptoms of COVID-19, including the CDC's recent expanded list of symptoms, will be prioritized for testing. Governor Bullock continues to urge providers to test any Montanan with one or more symptoms.

Additionally, the state will begin a process to test residents and employees in nursing homes and assisted living facilities and will continue enhanced surveillance in those facilities. The state will also partner with tribal communities to perform enhanced surveillance testing.

As more testing becomes available, the state will begin partnering with community health centers for testing frontline workers and engaging in general population surveillance testing.

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