Idaho rolls out new COVID-19 testing strategy to protect lives, preserve healthcare capacity, rebound economy

Friday May 22, 2020

Boise, Idaho – Governor Brad Little announced today that the Testing Task Force assembled one month ago has completed its recommendations.

“A strong economic rebound can only occur with a combination of efforts, and expanded and targeted testing is a big part of our strategy,” Governor Little said. “We have an impressive team of very capable local clinical and laboratory and research experts from across the state helping us navigate this crisis, and I sincerely appreciate their help.”

The task force’s full report is available at **https://rebound.idaho.gov/stages-of-reopening/** (https://rebound.idaho.gov/stages-of-reopening/).

The Testing Task Force’s recommendations include:

- Who should be tested and how often. Testing across all groups of people should be expanded. This will include testing of both symptomatic and some asymptomatic people based on priority level. The task force proposed five testing priority levels based on testing need. Priority 1 represents people with the highest need for testing (such as healthcare workers, residents of nursing homes, and others) and priority 5 represents those with the lowest need.
- Investment in local testing capacity must be significantly increased.
- Expansion of molecular diagnostic testing now, which in combination with proven public health practices such as tracing, physical distancing, enhanced sanitation, hand hygiene, and instructing ill people to stay home to protect others, will help stop the spread of COVID-19. Molecular diagnostic tests identify the presence of the virus and tell us who is infected. Knowing who has the virus is the most important information we need to reduce disease transmission.
- A limited use of serologic (antibody) testing, which detects human antibodies to the virus. The presence of antibodies tells us who has been exposed to the virus in the past, but that does not guarantee they will be protected from re-infection. There will be important public health uses for serology testing, but at a later point in the response.

“The takeaway message from these recommendations is that we will need to build incredible testing capacity plus the ability to respond to all of those results with appropriate clinical and public health follow-up care, if we hope to provide widescale and repeated testing for all Idahoans who may need to be tested,” said Dr. Christopher Ball, Chief of the Idaho Bureau of Laboratories and co-chair of the Testing Task Force.

The task force also noted:

- Testing for COVID-19 is not a strategy that stands alone; it informs public health prevention strategies and risk mitigation efforts.
- Well-executed risk mitigation efforts will achieve both reductions in disease transmission and a successfully reopened economy.
- Lastly, a robust approach to educating the public, businesses, industry, schools, and others must be a critical part of the enhanced public health prevention strategies required to effectively mitigate COVID-19 transmission risk.

Participants of the Testing Task Force include:

Co-chairs

Dr. Christopher Ball (Director, Idaho Bureau of Laboratories)

Dr. Jim Souza (Chief Medical Officer, St. Luke’s Health System)

State and Local Public Health

Division of Public Health:

Dr. Christine Hahn (Public Health Medical Director and State Epidemiologist)

Dr. Kris Carter (Career Epidemiology Field Officer – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Dr. Carolyn Bridges (Consultant)

Elke Shaw-Tulloch (Division Administrator, State Health Official)

Local Public Health District:

Maggie Mann (Director, Southeastern Idaho Public Health)

Healthcare

Boise Veterans Administration Medical Center:

Dr. Andrew Wilper (Chief of Staff)

Kootenai Health:

Dr. Karen Cabell (Chief Physician Executive)

Saint Alphonsus Health System:

Dr. Steven Nemerson (Chief Clinical Officer)

Dr. Patrice Burgess (Systems Contact for Testing)

St. Luke's Health System:

Dr. Matthew Burtelow (Boise Pathology Group, St. Luke’s Treasure Valley Medical Executive Committee)

Dr. Sky Blue (infectious disease physician, Sawtooth Epidemiology and Infectious Diseases, St. Luke’s Infection Prevention Committee)

Idaho Emergency Responders Health Center

Dr. Rob Hilvers

Retail Pharmacy

Albertsons Corporation: Rob Geddes, Director of Pharmacy and Regulatory Affairs

Community Organization

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Crush the Curve: Mike Boren

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