Trump administration pulls funding for drive-through COVID-19 testing

Enlarge / A drive-through COVID-19 testing site operated by Omni Healthcare in Melbourne, Fla. on April 8.

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One of the biggest challenges hampering US institutional response to the COVID-19 crisis is testing: when you can't identify who has the disease, you can't tell who might transmit it, or where they might do so. After critical months of delay, the US finally ramped up testing, but now, just as experts forecast many states are heading into the peak of this emergency, the federal government is ending funding for some successful testing programs.

The feds will stop covering the tab for most community testing sites as of Friday (tomorrow), April 10, NPR reports.

These popular drive-through sites have helped bolster other testing efforts in counties, towns, and cities nationwide. NPR spoke with officials in Pennsylvania's Montgomery County who said their drive-through site has tested at least 250 individuals per day since opening on March 21. By the time it closes Friday due to lack of funding, officials said, more than 5,000 tests will have been performed at that site.

The funding program originally included 41 testing sites

nationwide, representatives with FEMA and the Department of Health and Human Services told NPR. Some, such as the site in Montgomery County, as well as in nearby Philadelphia, will close when the money dries up. Others will be “transitioning to state-managed sites,” HHS told NPR. While many of those locations will close or change hands, however, local media in Texas report that two Dallas locations have received extended funding through May 30.

The spokesperson framed the withdrawal of funding as allowing states to dictate their own priorities, telling NPR, “The transition will ensure each state has the flexibility and autonomy to manage and operate testing sites within the needs of their specific community and to prioritize resources where they are needed the most.”

Behind the curve

The US finally developed capacity to start testing individuals at scale for the novel coronavirus in late March. By March 20, about 100,000 tests per day were being performed nationwide. But rather than continuing that exponential growth from the beginning of March, by April 1 it seemed testing had just about stalled out at that level of 100,000 tests per day.

According to data assembled by the COVID tracking project, that number has increased only very slightly in the past week, with about 140,000 new tests now reported each day. (One outlier, April 4, had about 227,000 new tests.) About 2.2 million cumulative COVID-19 tests have now been performed in the US, according to the tracking project.

Hospitals and private laboratories have been ramping up testing as quickly as they are able, but the number of daily tests needed still dwarfs the number being performed in many areas. The lack of available tests has led some doctors to use CT scans in their stead, Bloomberg News reported today, although the replacement “isn’t ideal.”

Not only can tests be hard to come by, but results can also take more than a week to come back. “At that point,” a radiologist in Georgia told Bloomberg, “a test that’s essentially not available is worthless.”

On Wednesday, HHS announced that licensed pharmacists will now be able to perform COVID-19 testing to help fill the gap.

“Giving pharmacists the authorization to order and administer COVID-19 tests to their patients means easier access to testing for Americans who need it,” Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said in a statement, adding that the “Trump Administration is pleased to give pharmacists the chance to play a bigger role” in this crisis.

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