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Slow Start for Rapid Coronavirus Tests Frustrates States

Most states received materials to conduct about 100 tests, regardless of population; 'I'm banging my head against the wall'



A coronavirus testing site on Tuesday in Lowell, Mass.

PHOTO: ELISE AMENDOLA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *[Dan Frosch](#)*, *[Deanna Paul](#)* and *[Ian Lovett](#)*

Updated April 11, 2020 1:54 pm ET

A rapid test for the new coronavirus that was touted by the White House as a game-changing development has proved vexing for state officials, who say the federal government has failed to provide enough necessary equipment.

“It’s incredibly frustrating,” said New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, whose state got 15 of [Abbott Laboratories](#)’ testing machines for Covid-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus — and cartridges to conduct only about 100 tests. Mr. Sununu, speaking at a news conference, said most of the machines would sit idle until he could figure out how to get more of the cartridges, one of which is needed to complete each test.

“There was a lot of hype on this nationally,” the Republican said. “To have 13 of these devices and no way to use them—I’m banging my head against the wall.”

After conducting a bulk purchase with Abbott, the federal government this month gave every state except Alaska 15 devices and 120 cartridges, regardless of its population or severity of its coronavirus outbreak.

In Illinois, where Abbott Laboratories is based, Gov. J.B. Pritzker said he spoke to the company more than a week ago and thought he had an agreement to conduct 88,000 tests a month, or about 3,000 tests a day. He subsequently learned that the federal government was taking over purchasing and distribution of the tests.

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Instead, Illinois received 15 Abbott machines and 120 cartridges. “That’s eight tests per machine for all of Illinois,” Mr. Pritzker, a Democrat, said.

The frustration over how the Abbott tests are being doled out underscores the Trump administration’s ongoing struggle to respond to national testing shortages. While [more coronavirus tests have been made available](#) in recent weeks, via private laboratories that now have FDA approval, [results can take days](#). High-volume tests have been hampered by [inaccurate results](#), delays and technical problems.

During a press conference last week, President Trump touted the Abbott tests, which deliver results in under 15 minutes, as “a whole new ballgame” in the fight against the new coronavirus.

In a statement, U.S. Health and Human Services spokeswoman Mia Heck said the federal government had purchased limited quantities for state labs because it wanted to allow enough for hospitals to buy as well. Ms. Heck said that states could order more supplies through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Ms. Heck didn’t respond to a question about why 49 states received a similar number of tests and machines, which process one test at a time.

Despite having the third-smallest population of any state, Alaska received 50 machines to ramp up testing in remote areas, she said.

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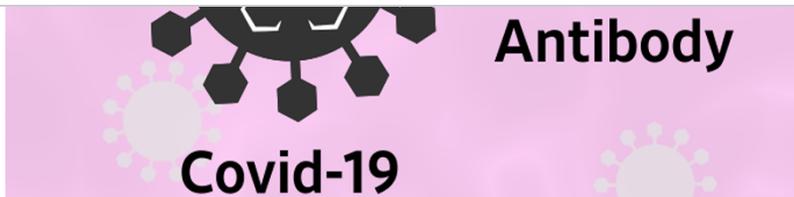
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HHS said it had also purchased 250 Abbott machines for the Indian Health Service, which provides health care for 2.6 million Native Americans. But Tori Kitcheyan, chairwoman of the National Indian Health Board, said the number of individual cartridges available for those machines wasn't enough for tribal members living on remote reservations with limited access to any Covid-19 testing.

Abbott is currently manufacturing 50,000 cartridges daily and has vowed to continue increasing production. As of Friday, it had shipped nearly half a million cartridges to doctors' offices, universities and laboratories that have placed their own orders, a spokeswoman said, in addition to those purchased by the federal government. The rapid test machines cost \$4,500 per device, while each cartridge costs \$40.

Detroit, was able to buy and deploy a large number of Abbott's rapid tests shortly after the company got approval from the FDA on March 27. The quick results helped reshape the city's response to the virus.

Since the start of the month, Detroit has administered more than 1,000 tests, initially focusing on first responders and bus drivers who had been in quarantine, said John Roach, a spokesman for the mayor. The city has already purchased 4,000 additional tests from Abbott and recently

said that rapid tests would be used at nursing homes and homeless shelters.

But for states, their comparatively tiny number of Abbott tests cannot make that sort of impact.

Officials in New York, at the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, said that their Abbott devices wouldn't be used until enough cartridges arrived to make them practical.

In Louisiana, another hot spot, Gov. John Bel Edwards said his administration had hoped to deploy the Abbott tests to help health-care workers statewide so they could stay on the job and preserve personal protective equipment.

"We have the machines, but not necessarily the cartridges to make a big difference," Mr. Edwards said.

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