

Partnering to Test

UNH and DHHS team up against COVID-19

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The high toll that the coronavirus has taken on long-term care facilities across the nation underscores the value of a new partnership between UNH and the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

In December, UNH's COVID testing lab began providing testing for 30 long-term care facilities and shelters throughout the state. To date, the lab has processed more than 3,000 tests conducted on the staff of those facilities as well as staff and residents of shelters. And that's in addition to the ongoing testing of the UNH community. The need for testing at the facilities and shelters is identified by DHHS; requests must be made to the state.

New Hampshire, which has more than 70 nursing homes, has been reported to have the highest rate of COVID-related nursing home deaths in the country. That figure is an indication of the low percentage of deaths in the population outside long-term care units.

The university estimates the lab will have capacity to run approximately 6,000 tests a week for the state.

“Since the UNH lab opened in August, we have processed more than 300,000 tests and we’re pleased to partner with the state to be able to extend this service to help protect our state’s most vulnerable populations,” said Marian McCord, senior vice provost for research, economic engagement and outreach and co-chair of the UNH testing and tracing committee.

“We are grateful to the governor’s office and our congressional delegation for their support of this work with funding from GOFERR (Governor’s Office for Emergency Relief & Recovery) and the CARES Act, as well as the university’s investment in and commitment to developing this important capability that is critical to our ability to safely operate and, ultimately, to help support the state.”

The university estimates the lab will have capacity to run approximately 6,000 tests a week for the state. Equipped with state-of-the-art instrumentation, the lab is capable of processing as many as 4,000 samples per day to meet the UNH mandate that every member of the community is required to participate in regular testing. Results are typically generated in fewer than 48 hours.

Plans are underway now to prioritize testing needs but the lab expects to process up to 1,000 tests a day for the state. CARES Act funds were allocated to support the lab.

“Our ability to protect residents and staff in long-term care facilities requires fast turnaround times on lab tests to rapidly identify and isolate new cases inside these facilities,” said DHHS Commissioner Lori Shibinette. “Due to nationwide increase in community transmission over the past few months, national testing laboratories are seeing increasing demands for testing from around the country. The department’s partnership with the UNH COVID testing lab is ensuring faster test results, which helps facilities quickly isolate people testing positive, contain the spread of the virus and protect the health of their residents and staff.”

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