**Washington needs COVID-19 testing plan**

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By

[The Seattle Times editorial board](https://www.seattletimes.com/author/cap-seattle-times-editorial-board/)

Gov. Jay Inslee must produce a comprehensive plan for increasing COVID-19 testing in Washington.

This is critical now that Inslee is reopening parts of the economy and deploying a [contract-tracing brigade](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/washington-has-1371-trained-officials-ready-to-begin-contact-tracing-on-the-coronavirus-inslee-says/), to better inform people exposed to the novel coronavirus.

A near-term testing plan, primarily for the next few months, could be released soon, Dr. Charissa Fotinos, the Washington State Health Care Authority’s deputy chief medical officer, said Thursday. That’s good. But the state also needs a longer-term plan to increase testing statewide, including testing people with no symptoms but whose jobs put them in proximity to many other people.

Oregon [announced](https://www.oregonlive.com/coronavirus/2020/05/how-oregons-statewide-coronavirus-study-with-100000-people-will-work.html) its testing plan May 1, including a surveillance plan to monitor 100,000 randomly chosen residents.

All states are suffering from the federal government’s epic failure to provide adequate testing supplies and protocols. Washington is continually scrambling for material while waiting and hoping the next batch of supplies promised by the feds will arrive.

Washington’s rate of testing is[adequate](https://apnews.com/64a594728f6e36480ee38cc1502436cc) by [some](https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-testing-us-states.html) measures, in part because of remarkable University of Washington efforts to increase capacity. National testing rates [appallingly trail](https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/12/health/us-coronavirus-testing-per-capita/index.html) that of many developed countries. Far more testing is needed to gauge the spread of disease, target outbreaks and inform efforts by government, employers and residents to resume normalcy.

There are also legitimate concerns about the accuracy of some tests.

But those obstacles should be transitory and not prevent Washington from having a detailed plan for who and where to test, as supplies increase. This is essential to restart the economy.

To move to phase two reopening — which Inslee hopes to do broadly in June, allowing restaurants and stores to reopen — states need capacity “sufficient to test, at minimum, all people with COVID-19 symptoms, as well as close contacts and those in essential roles,” according to a Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health [manual for governors](https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf).

Inslee last month demanded the White House do more planning. He asked for supplies, protocols and surveillance testing, to probe for hot spots and focus on areas with lower levels of testing.

The need for more clarity about testing is growing for multiple reasons.

One is because health officials are expanding the list of symptoms that trigger concern, increasing the pool of people eligible for testing.

Another is because the new contact-tracing brigade will notify many more people of exposure, some of whom will need tests.

Employers and residents also need assurance that testing plans are adequate to increase general safety, limit outbreaks and minimize closures and quarantines.

A testing plan should also seek to ensure testing occurs broadly and equitably across the state.

The lack of clarity, and continuing confusion about access to testing, increases anxiety and weakens support for collective actions people are taking for public safety.

A road map is also needed to explain how Inslee’s stated goals will be met.

Three weeks ago, [Inslee said his goal was 20,000 to 30,000 tests per day](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/will-washington-be-able-to-attain-the-widescale-testing-inslee-is-calling-for/), complementing a contact-tracing team of about 1,500 workers. He announced that team last week but has not said when that testing level could be achieved.

Testing has increased since then, to roughly 6,000 daily tests. Washington labs have capacity for 22,000 tests per day, but there’s uncertainty about whether that’s achievable now, with current supply bottlenecks.

Still, supply challenges shouldn’t delay planning. It’s a given supplies and testing must increase. Then what?

“The question is not whether we need more testing here but rather how much more, for whom, how frequently we need testing and how that will change as we move through these next phases of the pandemic,” said Dr. Judith Wasserheit, professor and chair of Global Health at the University of Washington

Many people can have and spread the disease but show no symptoms. So a testing plan should include asymptomatic people, or at least those in contact with many people in public places, she said.

If testing cannot scale up, and there’s still no treatment or vaccine, reopening will result in more infection and deaths, she said.

Washington has shown strong leadership combating the virus so far. Residents and employers are making great sacrifices to reduce its spread and avoid overwhelming hospitals.

The state had an edge because of organizations doing cutting-edge disease surveillance and research, and decision-making based on data and science more than politics.

A comprehensive, far-reaching and transparent testing plan is needed to continue that momentum.

***The Seattle Times editorial board****members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Brier Dudley, Jennifer Hemmingsen, Mark Higgins, Derrick Nunnally and William K. Blethen (emeritus).*