

OUR VIEW

Mistakes erode the public's trust level

Gov. Kate Brown announced on March 18 that the state had a deal with a private laboratory to do 20,000 COVID-19 tests. In early days of the state's pandemic response, it was a very reassuring declaration that the state could tap into private testing to reveal the scope of the virus.

"It's critical for us to increase our capacity so that we can fully assess the spread of COVID-19 in Oregon," Brown said.

But the deal turns out to be about half true. The state is only going to get about half the tests. No contract had been signed when the announcement was made. And the state does not plan to put the tests into immediate use to test more Oregonians.

We don't believe Brown intentionally misled anyone. Nik Blosser, the governor's chief of staff, told The Oregonian it was his fault and apologized for the misinformation provided to the governor to announce. The state was working on a deal. He explained that he was confused about how testing works and rushed to release information without confirming it.

The state actually did not sign the contract with the provider, Quest Diagnostics, until two weeks after Brown's announcement. It is for up to \$690,000 at \$69 a test. And the state is not planning to use them right now. It will hold on to them and use them later — perhaps when some social distancing requirements are lifted and there is a new surge.

How is it that we know Brown's announcement was wrong?

We know because journalists at The Oregonian asked questions and used Oregon's public records law to hold government accountable. Reporters looked for a copy of the contract in a state database. It wasn't there. They asked for a copy of the contract. It wasn't provided until a week later. And it turned out the deal was smaller than had been announced — 10,000 tests not 20,000 — and had not even been signed until April 1.

In a crisis or under tight deadlines, people do sometimes not act carefully. It's human nature. But it's vital that Oregonians can trust what Brown says the state is doing about COVID-19. She can't allow the public's faith in the government's response to erode.

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- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.
- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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Don't forget 'deaths of despair'

The number is 150,000. That's roughly how many Americans — mostly middle-aged, working-class white men and women — succumb to "deaths of despair" in the United States each year. The causes are suicide, alcohol and drugs tracing back to lack of jobs, low wages and the dissolution of family and church. The number could turn out to be greater than the coronavirus deaths, but, thanks to the pandemic, social distancing and the virtual shutdown of America, the despair could grow.

It was economists who first discovered that here was a major social group whose longevity was decreasing. That was contrary to what was going on all over the world where life expectancy had been going up for just about everyone in developed and even most undeveloped countries. Life expectancy, while still higher for black and Hispanic Americans, declined enough to make the life expectancy numbers show a decline for Americans as a whole.

What mostly deprived these people of the opportunities of old was an increasingly automated nation that just did not have jobs to the extent that used to be the case. Lately, there has been growth and something like a half million solid jobs available in manufacturing that sadly went unfilled because of an absence of the required skills.

Good jobs lend a person dignity, the ability to get a home, start a family and enjoy a rewarding life. And here is what a recent Rasmussen poll of Americans showed: More Americans in this virus

JAY AMBROSE

epoch are worried about loss of income than their health. Of course, long before the virus, things were beginning to fall apart for many without college educations, such as disdain visited on them by the better off. Remember the phrase "basket of deplorables"?

Marriage became less frequent, the men did not have families, and the kids from fatherless homes were more likely to be suicidal, to get involved in crime, to drop out of school and to remain poor. A Harvard study indicated that people from fatherless homes were less likely to be socially mobile than others, less able to climb upward, to fulfill a dream.

Another Harvard scholar said the "deaths of despair" were tied to a decline in spirituality. As Charles Murray, a social scientist, also pointed out, fewer and fewer of the poorest 20% go to church, which is also a community, a group of friends who help each other. The opioid deaths have actually decreased under President Donald Trump as wages have gone up, especially for the most vulnerable, along with a record number of jobs being created. Fewer regulations and corporate taxes at last as low at those in Europe have made a difference.

Now we have one of the most stunning events in American history, a pandemic that has practically shut the country down. To avert COVID-19

contagion as best as possible, most of us are confined to our homes, and all kinds of businesses have closed as more than 10 million additional people have lost jobs in just the last few weeks. A quarter of the upended businesses say they may never rise again. Despite a \$2 trillion bill enacted into law to help the worst hit businesses and people, we're faced with an almost impossible task just as important as defeating the virus.

While I continue to bow to the experts in the steps the states and the federal government have taken, we must understand that our society could suffer for years if we are not able to open things up fairly soon. Some say it could be a matter of weeks or months and one expert says a disastrous year and a half.

A bad economy kills, and I have made that point to emphasize that we need decisive, intelligent leadership. It's encouraging that Trump is now putting a special task force together, but just as the health workers have been heroic, we must have heroic entrepreneurs, managers, workers, neighbors helping each other and more training and rejuvenated churches as we push ahead with a free market system made more free. We must understand that talk of the economy is not something crass but something humane.

Jay Ambrose is an op-ed columnist for Tribune News Service. Readers may email him at speaktojay@aol.com.

OTHER VIEWS

States alone? Maybe that's positive

Editorial from The Los Angeles Times:

For months, the White House has been sending an implicit but unmistakable message to state governors: When it comes to handling the coronavirus pandemic, you're pretty much on your own. "We're not a shipping clerk," President Donald Trump grumbled to reporters last month as an explanation of why he has ignored pleas from states for help obtaining ventilators, N95 masks and crucial medical equipment.

The administration's failure to take a leadership role on procuring medical supplies has created a bidding free-for-all that has set states against one another, other nations and even the federal government, driving up prices for medical supplies that health care workers need to effectively and safely care for COVID-19 patients. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo described it as "like being on eBay with 50 other states, bidding on a ventilator." As a result, doctors and nurses have faced a dangerous shortage of face masks and other basic protective gear, and state leaders have resorted to begging for ventilators to save their sickest patients.

This week, California Gov. Gavin Newsom said "enough." He announced that the state was striking out on its own, leveraging its vast budget and its relationships with manufacturers to obtain the protective gear it needs — and

possibly enough to supply other states. California will spend as much as \$1.4 billion in coming weeks to buy medical supplies, including 200 million medical-grade face masks a month.

"We decided to step back from all of that and say, look, as a nation-state with the capacity to write a check for hundreds of millions, no billions, of dollars, we're in a position to do something bold and big that could be a catalyst to increase supply and ultimately increase the capacity," Newsom said Wednesday during his daily pandemic briefing.

In other words, who needs the help of federal government when you have the world's fifth-largest economy?

It's outrageous that the state finds itself in this position; it's beyond obvious that the federal government is in the best position to procure the mass quantities of gear needed to respond to what is a global health care crisis. But this isn't the first time California has gone its own way when the federal government failed to provide forward-thinking leadership or adopted policies contrary to the Golden State's interests, such as those on fuel-emission standards, immigration and health care. In 2016, then-Gov. Jerry Brown famously quipped that if the Trump administration stops gathering climate change data from its satellites, "California will launch its own damn satellite." He wasn't kidding.

Now that California is stepping into the leadership vacuum to help itself and other states access medical supplies and protective equipment, it should do the same when it comes to COVID-19 testing.

Trump's coronavirus task force is reportedly mulling a national strategy for conducting widespread diagnostic testing and using a different type of screening to identify people who are immune from COVID-19, two steps that are absolutely essential for the country to be able to get back to work. But after months of the administration's dithering, backtracking and mixed messaging on its pandemic response, we don't have faith that it will be able to manage the next phase competently. This might be the time for states to band together to develop and deploy their own testing protocol and strategies.

In a way, perhaps it's a good thing that the White House hasn't centralized the deployment of medical resources during the pandemic because, honestly, some of the decisions it has made so far have been terrible. Also, given Trump's track record, we fear the president would use the pandemic to reward states with Trump-friendly leaders and punish the rest. Given that California is so often at loggerheads with this administration, it can't afford to take that chance.