

# Federal 'runaround' frustrates state plan to expand virus testing

Public records show state officials facing bureaucratic obstacles in quest for the swabs needed for testing

By Nick Budnick  
Oregon Capital Bureau

If Oregon pandemic officials had a TV show these last two months, it could be called "In Search of Swabs" — and just about every episode would be deeply unsatisfying.

Public records show that over the last six weeks, state officials have battled repeated bureaucratic obstacles in trying to obtain needed swabs and other coronavirus testing supplies from the federal government and private manufacturers, contributing to Oregon's low per-capita testing rates.

Oregon's lack of success is highly significant. Gov. Kate Brown has made testing a central feature in her plans for reopening a state economy that has been battered by the pandemic.

To combat the problem, the state recently hired a new state testing director to focus on the problem. Meanwhile, Brown has asked hospitals around the state, which do the bulk of testing, to commit to contributing 18,000 tests per week to a statewide strategy to reopen the economy.

The success of those plans, Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said, depends on whether the global supply chain can provide the swabs and other test supplies necessary to implement them. The problem is national and even global, with authorities in places like France, California and elsewhere blaming insufficient testing on the lack of swabs to collect samples, as well as other test supply shortages.

"These supply chain glitches are going to be the biggest barrier to our being able to scale testing up further than we already have," Allen said.

And Oregon, with a small population and fewer people reported killed by COVID-19 than many states, faces particular challenges.

"What we've been led to believe is that, because we just don't have very much disease in Oregon, we're very low priority for receiving any of those supplies," Allen said of the state's difficulties. He added that it "almost feels punitive. ... We think we've been doing a good job managing our resources and reactions so we don't have very much disease. And that means we can't get



Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times

Coronavirus testing.

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## Trump-hyped machines idle in Oregon

About a month ago, President Donald Trump unveiled rapid coronavirus-testing machines to great fanfare, saying the devices manufactured by Abbott Laboratories would create "a whole new ballgame" in fighting the disease.

The newly released public records show that what's happened in Oregon since then is a story of frustration.

The federal government sent 15 of the Abbott machines to Oregon in early April. Today, however, the bulk of them remain effectively on the shelf — with no supplies to operate them.

When the Abbott rapid-testing machines were delivered to Oregon, they came with only 124 test kits, causing the state to distribute only three of the 15 machines. To help rural Oregon, they were sent to Curry, Lake and Morrow counties.

The machines require a special Abbott-made test-kit to operate. So, according to the emails, state officials reached out to Abbott to buy some.

Abbott, however, said Oregon could only order from the federal government.

State officials ordered 5,000 more test kits from the federal government — the International Reagent Resource office

operated by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

When the shipment arrived however, it fell short — 4,996 test kits short.

"We went through the CDC-IRR ordering process as we had been told and we were only able to get four Abbott kits out of the 5,000 that we ordered," wrote Akiko Saito, an Oregon Health Authority official, to federal officials on April 11. "Can you please assist us in figuring out how we can get closer to a requested amount? At this point we have devices but no test kits to run any tests."

Two days later, in a call with CDC, came the word: The federal government "is not accepting large orders because the tests are in short supply," wrote John Fontana, the Oregon Health Authority lab director, in an April 13 email.

Rather, he was told, states should look to Abbott for supplies, contrary to what records show Oregon was told by Abbott just a week before.

On April 16, David Csernak, an official with Health and Human Services, emailed state officials confirming that the availability of additional Abbott cartridges to boost testing would not be happening.

"At this time there is a critical shortage on the Abbott test kits and the ability to acquire more is very difficult and

competitive at the moment," he wrote.

Csernak added that he would be happy to assist with a new strategy to help rural areas boost testing, "since Abbott kits don't seem to be the answer."

The federal official's pessimistic take on Abbott has proven true. On April 21, Shirley Smith, a contracting analyst with the state Department of Administrative Services, wrote to other state officials involved in getting test supplies saying she hadn't heard back from Abbott: "My apologies for not being able to obtain these test kits, I am trying!"

Smith sent another Abbott update the next day, saying "I have not heard from them and unlikely I will, sadly."

According to Pat Allen of the Oregon Health Authority, state officials did finally get Abbott officials on the phone, and the company said they won't fill orders directly from the state.

"This has been the maddening thing," he said. "We're getting the runaround."

Allen likened the federal government's sending of the 15 Abbott machines to "giving us a printer with no ink."

A recent study questioned the Abbott machine's accuracy, though the company has defended its product.

## Trump administration spotlights Oregon problems

Two other rapid-test vendors, Cepheid and Biomerieux, similarly told Smith that they would not sell Oregon any

tests. Rather, the state would have to go through the federal government, according to public records.

Federal officials have stressed to Oregon and other states that they have to "triage" requests for help based on certain criteria, including need. Supplies, including for testing, are allocated based on state population size as well as the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak there.

Nevertheless, Oregon was one of three states to be mentioned in an April 17 White House press briefing about lack of testing and touting the Trump administration's efforts to help states. A prominent adviser to Donald Trump, Deborah Birx, suggested it was the states' fault and said the administration was "working on building capacity" in Oregon, Montana and Maine.

Allen said of Birx's comment, "it was really annoying to have the White House call us out ... for low testing capacity, in the face of them making decisions that don't get us the supplies that would let us have more testing capacity."

The statement by Birx appeared to reinforce the criticism that Oregon officials have received for limiting the amount of testing done, in order to conserve supplies.

The newly released emails, however, show the federal government has encouraged Oregon to take that approach.

Two days before Birx's comment, a federal official assigned to the Oregon State Emergency Coordination Center told state officials in an email that the federal government wanted them to prioritize their testing location needs and limit the state's urgent requests to the federal government for more supplies.

The official explicitly acknowledged that the federal guidance "may reduce overall capacity" for testing in Oregon.

"There is a nationwide shortage on all testing supplies," wrote Csernak of Health and Human Services. "In order to avoid reaching a point where supplies are depleted and testing has to shut down, it is critical that each state strategically prioritize their labs and testing locations. While this may reduce overall capacity in the short term, it will allow vital

resources to be concentrated at key locations and maintain testing capability."

## Some tests arrive

The next day, the state was informed that 10,000 testing kits had been approved for Oregon by the federal government — a more general-use kind, not the kind that can only be used in Abbott machines.

But Oregon was forced to wait before ordering any more of the kits. Under federal government rules, it cannot order additional kits until the previous shipment arrives, according to the emails.

Allen said the bulk of the 10,000 kits were shipped out to county public health agencies. And despite the latest shipment, the state's testing problem doesn't look to be solved anytime soon.

That's because Oregon officials hope to ramp up the overall statewide testing rate to 15,000 to 25,000 tests a week.

"Do the math on that: 10,000 collection kits is not much," Allen said.

In March and April, The Oregonian revealed that an earlier claim by Gov. Kate Brown that the state had contracted with Quest Diagnostics for 20,000 new test kits was false and overstated, and that in reality the state had contracted with the lab company to process 10,000 tests, not provide the supplies needed to collect samples, such as swabs.

Allen said that contract is not the answer. In addition to the lack of collection supplies, the speed of the Quest testing turnaround is not as good as what Oregon hospitals have developed since the contract was inked.

Currently most of the testing happening in Oregon is processed by hospitals and private labs, some of whom have established relationships with their own suppliers.

In contrast, the testing overseen by the state public health lab is reserved for people who are a significant risk to others, such as health care providers.

After weeks of difficulties in securing supplies, the state appears ready to increase its reliance on hospitals to take on the job.

## GRADUATION

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BHS principal Greg Mitchell said Friday that discussions began even earlier. After Gov. Kate Brown announced in early April that schools would remain closed for the rest of the academic year, more than 200 school administrators throughout the state began brainstorming how to handle this year's graduation ceremonies, meeting each Thursday.

"It was quite a process, actually," Mitchell said.

Parents and students were behind the push to offer a drive-thru diploma handoff in many schools around the state, he said. His staff leadership team and senior class officers began discussing how that would work at Baker High School.

Next, seniors were surveyed about their preferences on not only graduation, but also on how to handle the senior awards night, senior assembly and senior party.

Through that process, students agreed that they would also like to include a citywide procession of vehicles carrying graduates and their families through Baker City. (One graduate will be allowed per vehicle, and the car will be driven by a parent or guardian to ensure safety and to avoid distracted driving).

Here are preliminary plans for

how it will be organized:

Graduates and their families will meet in vehicles at a staging area at the Baker Sports Complex parking lot at 2 p.m. on Sunday, June 7. They will proceed south on Fifth Street to the bus lane in front of BHS where Mitchell, wearing a mask and gloves for the students' protection, will award diplomas to graduates, who are expected to be seated in the passenger side of their vehicles.

Graduates will wear their caps and gowns, cords and medals. Vehicles can be decorated.

BHS and Baker Technical Institute staff members will be encouraged to line the sidewalk to greet and congratulate students as they drive by.

The diploma presentations will be live-streamed on the internet and recorded for posting later as well.

Valedictorian and other keynote speeches will be pre-recorded with Elkhorn Media and posted online for viewing during the parade.

Mitchell said the seniors chose Summer Curry, a member of the BHS maintenance staff and a military veteran who served tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, to speak at this year's graduation.

Mitchell said he expects to award diplomas to 110 BHS graduates and 15 students from Eagle Cap Innovative High School who are joining

this year's BHS ceremony rather than having their own as they have in the past because of the logistics involved in the planning process.

As the ceremony continues, and the vehicles pass through the bus lane, they will gather in the student parking lot to prepare for the parade through town.

City Manager Fred Warner Jr. said Friday that the city is coordinating plans to lead the procession and to control traffic through intersections as the vehicles make their way from the high school to Main Street.

Warner said the city did not believe the Oregon Department of Transportation would allow the streets to be closed during the pandemic and the city did not believe a closure was needed.

A police cruiser will lead the procession, he said. The plan calls for vehicles to make their way from the parking lot and travel west on E Street to 10th Street and then to turn south on 10th and then east onto Broadway, traveling to Second Street and again turning south.

The procession will then travel to Auburn Avenue and travel east to Main Street where it will proceed north before dispersing in the area of Main and Madison streets.

Warner said either two police cars, or one police vehicle and one

fire department vehicle, will travel behind the procession.

"We believe we'll probably have some volunteers at the lights on 10th and Broadway and Main streets to stop traffic as the procession is going by," Warner said. "We won't allow cross traffic."

Some public works employees probably will be asked to help control traffic at Auburn Avenue and Main Street to provide extra help with vehicles coming in from the freeway and Highway 7, he said.

"It will be a Sunday afternoon, so traffic should be light," Warner said.

City officials will work with the downtown association to maintain social distancing on the sidewalks for those who want to line the streets to honor the graduates.

Although the ceremony is more than a month away, Warner expects some kind of social distancing to remain in force by June 7.

"I don't know how many people will come out," he said. "I think it's doable with the social distancing we have now. I think people will respect the celebration."

The traditional graduation night party has been canceled, but the senior parent organization is planning to host a "Virtual Senior Party," Mitchell said. Prizes and gifts that seniors receive during the party will be available to be picked up at the

front of BHS the morning of June 8, he said.

Another aspect of the recognition that goes to seniors each year prior to graduation, the traditional Senior Awards Night, also has been canceled, Mitchell said. The event will be replaced with a "Virtual Senior Awards Ceremony," to be recorded by District staff with District personnel announcing the recipients of scholarships and other awards. The ceremony will be posted online the night it originally had been scheduled: Wednesday, May 27.

A virtual senior assembly featuring the traditional senior slide program is scheduled for June 3. It also will be live-streamed and recorded.

The senior parent group also is working with area businesses to honor the Class of 2020 with window displays featuring students' yearbook photos.

Lawn signs are being created by the District print shop for display on front lawns of the seniors' homes. A survey is being conducted to determine if some families would prefer to opt out of that program.

More information is available by calling Witty at the District Office at 541-524-2260 or by emailing him at mark.witty@bakersd.org. Mitchell is available by calling BHS at 541-524-2600 or by email at greg.mitchell@bakersd.org