Increase Federal Funding for Widespread Testing, Tracing and Tracking

Business Roundtable calls on Congress to provide funding to rapidly scale up testing, tracing and tracking for COVID-19, building on important steps that the Administration and Congress have taken already to increase testing capacity.

Specifically, additional federal funding is needed to expand testing and laboratory capacity; enable innovative breakthroughs in testing technology; launch sentinel testing programs and other methods of identifying emerging hotspots; enhance states’ capabilities to develop interoperable contact tracing and tracking (i.e., syndromic monitoring) systems; and enhance national data systems for timely collection and analysis of public health information.

The recommendations below outline key funding priorities:

I. Testing

Testing plays a critical role in virus response and recovery by identifying individuals who are, or previously were, infected. Further, sentinel testing can help public officials track the spread of the virus across geographies and population subsets. Testing should also be supported by a nationwide reporting system to collect and analyze infection information to help public health decision-making. Federal funding is needed to support the following testing measures:
1. Increased testing capacity, including testing sites, supply and reporting systems

In addition to the funds provided for testing in the CARES Act and the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act, federal funding is needed to increase the number and types of specimen collection sites and ensure those sites have adequate testing supplies (e.g., specimen collection kits and transport media, protective equipment for technicians, secure order and data entry systems, and point-of-care test kits) to meet the level of testing set by public health officials. Funding is also needed to further increase public, private, and academic laboratory capacities, particularly for additional high-throughput testing platforms with 24/7 operation, along with necessary supply chain support, to minimize test turnaround time and provide the broad testing access necessary to reopen the economy and keep it open. Additionally, funding should support timely, accurate and consistent reporting of testing data between health providers and state, local and federal public health authorities.

2. Enhanced funding for R&D and validation of new, high-quality tests

Enhanced funding for R&D and validation of new, high-quality tests. Congress should appropriate funding to support the development of additional high-quality and reliable COVID-19 tests. This includes emerging testing methods (antibody tests, antigen tests, genetic tests); expanded specimen types (saliva, finger stick blood tests); and testing protocols such as batch testing for groups of individuals. These additional test methods, specimen types and protocols will better support expanded testing access models (telehealth-guided, at-home collection, drive-through), which can increase the speed and scale of testing and reduce bottlenecks of technician-assisted sample collection.

3. Coordinated sentinel surveillance testing program

Public health officials indicate that a high percentage of individuals who contract COVID-19 are asymptomatic. Sentinel surveillance testing is, therefore, an important tool to help public health authorities better understand the prevalence of the virus, predict its spread and enable more targeted interventions. Testing of asymptomatic individuals as part of a government-directed sentinel testing program should be funded by the government.
II. Contact Tracing & Tracking

Increased federal funding is needed to build a nationally-coordinated contact tracing program and a syndromic surveillance system to monitor infections and predict, prevent and mitigate future outbreaks. In particular, federal funding should support:

1. Training and deployment of a substantial contact tracing workforce

Manual contact tracing, adopted at scale, will be a critically important tool for curbing viral spread. Funding is needed for federal and state programs to rapidly hire and train a substantial contact tracing workforce to work with individuals who have contracted or come in contact with someone who has contracted the virus, advise those individuals and limit further exposure.

2. Digitally-enabled contact tracing

Manual contact tracing programs should be augmented by digital tools, including privacy-protective, peer-to-peer applications. Funding should support the development of interoperable technology solutions to more effectively and accurately monitor infections and exposure to the virus, and to promote public adoption of privacy-protective applications.

3. Real-time data-sharing platform for syndromic surveillance

At present, federal agencies lack the digital infrastructure to collect and process public health data, quickly identify and predict emerging hotspots and coordinate interventions. Additionally, current approaches to contact tracing and tracking of infections and exposure are inconsistent across the states. Building on existing public health data reporting systems such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s syndromic surveillance system, additional funding is needed to enhance the timeliness and accuracy of nationwide data collection efforts related to COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as to enhance the consistency of reporting by state and local governments. This effort should be integrated with localized diagnostic and sentinel testing and testing capacity data to improve national, state and local officials’ understanding of epidemiological trends and enable early outbreak detection so that healthcare systems can plan ahead and adjust capacity, as needed.