

New initiative: Changing up testing strategies

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The Ohio Department of Health provided free at-home COVID-19 test kits to community members through the public library system. This helped reach communities across the state and played a part in Ohio having some of the lowest adjusted COVID-19 death rates in the country.



The “What”

Due to limitations in availability and technology, testing initiatives that were established early in the COVID-19 pandemic lacked the ability to truly meet all Ohioans where they lived. The arrival of at-home COVID-19 testing and the Ohio Department of Health’s (ODH) ability to purchase these tests through the Epidemiology and Laboratory for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) cooperative agreement funding, changed this dynamic.

ODH was among the first states to purchase at-home tests and incorporate them aggressively into its testing strategy, leveraging a number of local partners to provide at-home COVID-19 testing to the community. Most notably, ODH established an innovative partnership with our network of public libraries. Through the libraries we were able to make free at-home COVID-19 tests available in virtually every community across the state of Ohio, supporting our strategy of providing tests to anyone, anywhere, for any reason.



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An important factor in helping to slow the spread was Ohio's ability to emphasize the impact of COVID-19 testing and provide free, convenient at-home testing in every community of Ohio.

The “So What”

Since the beginning of this partnership with 200 public library systems we have distributed 3.7 million at-home tests. At certain points of the pandemic, when the virus was surging and demand for tests was peaking, Ohio's libraries were the primary source for Ohioans to access testing and protect their families and communities.

Recent independent studies¹ found that Ohio suffered among the lowest adjusted COVID-19 death rates in the country. While there are a number of factors that contributed to this statistic, there is no doubt that an important factor in helping to slow the spread was Ohio's ability to emphasize the impact of COVID-19 testing and provide free, convenient at-home testing in every community of Ohio. ODH would not have otherwise been able to quickly increase access to early detection methods, funded by ELC, which helped to reduce deaths in Ohio.

The “Now What”

The partnerships ODH established through the pandemic around test distribution and getting resources to Ohioans have created additional opportunities. The non-traditional, non-clinical partners like libraries, early childhood education centers, and others established a model that can be replicated to leverage trusted non-healthcare partners to implement public health initiatives.

The potential to support preventative care through making at-home testing available is something we are looking at in other areas. In fact, Ohio's recently-enacted state budget included an appropriation to support a pilot around using home health care and testing to target specific diseases in vulnerable populations.

Key contributors to this project include Governor Mike DeWine, Dr. Bruce Vanderhoff-Director of Health, Major General John C. Harris Jr., Lance Himes, Kristen Dickerson, and Mark Hamlin.

¹Bollyky TJ, et al. Assessing COVID-19 pandemic policies and behaviours and their economic and educational trade-offs across US states from Jan 1, 2020, to July 31, 2022: an observational analysis. *Lancet* 2023; 401: 1341–60.

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