

America Still Needs a Comprehensive National COVID-19 Testing and Support Strategy

ASCP Issues a Call to Action to Help End the Pandemic

January 20, 2021

The death toll from the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) will soon surpass 400,000, and more than 23 million Americans are believed to have been infected with the virus. New infections have skyrocketed, with newly diagnosed cases averaging about 250,000/day.¹

Over the last 30 days, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that U.S. public health and clinical laboratories had performed approximately 50 million tests for COVID-19. This is about one-fifth of the total number of COVID-19 tests that have been performed since the beginning of the pandemic. Laboratories are operating 24/7 as they struggle to keep pace with demand. While America's clinical laboratories have been pushed to capacity, public health experts warn that far more testing—not just for COVID-19 but other tests as well—is needed. Recent [analysis](#) from the CDC suggests that more than half of COVID-19 transmission occurs in patients without symptoms (i.e., asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic).² Increased testing of asymptomatic individuals is needed, but if undertaken in an uncoordinated, uninformed manner, long delays in testing will result. A national coordinated strategy is needed.

ASCP provides our strong support for President Biden and the newly seated 117th Congress to immediately address major gaps in the current response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of a comprehensive, national COVID-19 testing strategy has resulted in poor coordination, disjointed testing patterns and chronic laboratory supply shortages that have slowed COVID-19 and other testing. The United States needs a robust and well-coordinated response to optimize testing to effectively address the needs of patients and end the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to working with President Biden, his Cabinet and Congress in 2021 to develop a truly comprehensive, national pandemic response plan.

Even though Americans are now being vaccinated against COVID-19, laboratory testing remains critical to the effort to end the pandemic through 2021 and beyond. Indeed, as the [COVID Collaborative](#) recently noted, "Defeating COVID-19 requires a redoubled commitment to testing. Without broad access to testing, our common response is flying blind. Only testing enables states to identify who has COVID-19, to prevent the disease from spreading in at-risk populations, and to predict where it is likely to go next."³

Unfortunately, laboratories are suffering from acute and chronic shortages of testing equipment, supplies, personal protective equipment and other critical inputs. They are

¹ [CDC COVID Data Tracker](#), Accessed Jan. 1, 2021

² Johansson, PhD, Michael A. et al., SARS-CoV-2 Transmission from People Without COVID-19 Symptoms, *JAMA Netw. Open.* 2021; 4(1), January 7, 2021. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2774707>

³ COVID Collaborative, [Call to Action to Defeat COVID-19 and Promote National Recovery and Renewal](#), Accessed: Jan. 15, 2021.

also plagued by staffing challenges as pathologists and laboratory personnel report high levels of burnout, fatigue and repetitive-motion injuries from the intense demand for their services. These challenges undermine national test capacity and stymie efforts to curtail the spread of coronavirus. Moreover, these shortages and COVID-19 testing demands are crowding out the ability of laboratories to provide other testing services necessary for non-COVID-19 patients to access needed medical services, such as surgical procedures.

To improve laboratory test capacity, stronger federal leadership is needed. **Therefore, ASCP renews its call for the development of a comprehensive, National COVID-19 Diagnostic Testing Strategy.** We strongly urge the Biden Administration and Congress to work together to immediately implement a national testing strategy, one that provides more aggressive oversight, coordination and support of laboratory testing throughout the United States and to better utilize this data to make better-informed decisions about how to safely and sustainably reopen schools, businesses and return American life to “normal.”

To support patient needs and increased laboratory test capacity, ASCP urges the adoption of the following goals and initiatives for inclusion in a comprehensive, National COVID-19 Testing Strategy in 2021:

Intensify coordination, communication and transparency efforts

- Improve coordination and communication between the federal and state governments, clinical laboratories and key stakeholders (e.g., diagnostic device/products manufacturers, healthcare institutions and healthcare providers).
- Improve transparency and information flow between the government, clinical laboratories and other stakeholders to ensure appropriate policies are adopted to improve diagnostic, screening, and surveillance testing, contact tracing and other pandemic mitigation efforts.

Revitalize the unreliable laboratory supply chain

- Ensure more aggressive oversight and direction of the laboratory supply chain to ensure laboratories can obtain sufficient testing supplies (e.g., swabs, viral transport media, etc.) to meet patient testing needs.
- Provide funding to help clinical laboratories secure the high-throughput testing equipment, supplies and personnel necessary to increase access to rapid COVID-19 and other critical pathology and laboratory services.

Recognize the critical role that laboratory professionals provide to mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic

- Ensure financial resources are available for workforce development initiatives, such as burnout mitigation, recruitment/retention incentives, clinical training support, hazard pay and student loan forgiveness to ensure laboratories can secure the personnel needed to provide complex laboratory medicine services.
- Protect the stability of the laboratory workforce by ensuring that laboratory personnel are vaccinated as part of the Phase 1a vaccine rollout.

Add laboratory medicine expertise to the Biden COVID advisory panel

- Utilize the extensive expertise of pathologists and laboratory medicine experts by including these professionals on the Administration’s COVID-19 advisory panel.
- Laboratory medicine expertise is needed to provide federal and state policymakers direct access to scientific expertise on the roles that laboratory medicine can play in effective pandemic mitigation efforts, such as optimizing the use of diagnostic, screening and surveillance testing for optimum patient care, which includes test result interpretation and guidance for the testing of asymptomatic individuals.

Ensure optimum and transparent reporting mandates

- Re-examine federal reporting requirements to ensure federal, state and local policymakers and public health personnel have near real-time access to key data (e.g., test performance metrics, patient-specific symptomatic information, supply shortage information, etc.) to ensure robust public health mitigation capabilities.

Intensify efforts to vaccinate all Americans

- Strengthen efforts to vaccinate Americans rapidly to hasten the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and safeguard patient health.
- As part of accelerating the vaccine rollout, intense laboratory testing must be utilized to ensure vaccines are providing sufficient antibody production and to demonstrate that the current vaccines provide coverage for the new hyper-transmissible viral variants that could undermine pandemic mitigation efforts.

Intensify research and development of COVID-19 prognostic markers and therapeutics

- Although several risk factors for the development of severe COVID-19 disease have been identified, further investigation of prognostic markers are needed so as to more judiciously use healthcare resources.
- Ensure sufficient funding to incentivize rapid development of effective COVID-19 therapeutics (e.g., monoclonal antibodies, convalescent plasma, etc.) to improve the treatment of COVID-19 patients, including those who may be asymptomatic.
- Ensure that laboratory medicine is effectively utilized to monitor and assess the effectiveness of therapeutics and to reduce the possible spread of COVID-19 and possible variants.

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ASCP represents the frontlines of laboratory diagnostics, and our membership of 100,000+ board-certified pathologists, other physicians and non-physician laboratory professionals lead the nation’s efforts to diagnose and screen for COVID-19 and other diseases/conditions. ASCP is the world’s largest organization representing the field of laboratory medicine and pathology.