

COVID-19 TESTING AND THE OPENING OF THE U.S. ECONOMY

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TRAVEL INDUSTRY DEPRESSION

America's travel industry has been hit harder by the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic than any other sector of the economy, having lost over 8 million jobs this year after reaching a high of 15.8 million travel-related jobs in the United States in 2019.

While the broader economy is in a recession, the travel industry is in a full-blown depression. The industry's unemployment rate stands at 51%, which is twice the national unemployment rate at the height of the Great Depression (1933). Over a third of all jobs lost since March are travel industry jobs, which makes one thing abundantly clear: There can be no broader economic recovery without a recovery in the travel industry.

SAFELY RESTARTING TRAVEL TO ACCELERATE RECOVERY

America's travel industry has put forth a plan to accelerate rehiring and economic recovery by safely restarting travel. The plan calls on Congress, the administration, industry, and travelers to jointly pursue a layered and phased approach for safely reopening the travel economy. The five key goals of the plan are:

1. Deliver continued relief for impacted travel workers and businesses: For those businesses without enough revenue or demand to rehire workers, Congress must provide continued financial relief through grants and loans.
2. Implement industry-wide health and safety measures: Leaders from every travel sector worked with public health experts to develop industry-wide health and safety guidance. This guidance aligns with and exceeds CDC guidelines, and can be adopted across the industry to protect workers and customers.
3. Provide limited safe harbor for businesses that follow proper guidelines: Congress should provide limited, temporary and immediate safe harbor for businesses that follow proper health and safety guidelines to protect against COVID-19. This will provide businesses with the certainty they need to reopen and rehire.
4. Promote healthy travel to regions that have safely reopened: Congress should provide grants to destination marketing organizations (DMOs) for promoting healthy travel practices and generating demand in regions where it's safe to travel. This will ensure travelers do their part to keep themselves and others safe, while generating the necessary demand to rehire workers.
5. Incentivize a safe restart of the travel economy through tax credits and deductions: With health and safety measures in place, Congress should stimulate demand by providing temporary tax credits and deductions. This will incrementally boost demand in order to accelerate rehiring of the travel workforce.

The collaborative effort by Congress, industry leaders, and travelers to achieve these five goals can restore nearly 800,000 American jobs and add an additional \$163 billion to the U.S. economy by the end of 2021.*

THE INDISPENSABLE ROLE OF COVID-19 TESTING

Each step of a phased, layered and safe reopening of the travel economy requires accurate, fast, and accessible COVID-19 testing. In fact, without it, none of the five pillars can be achieved. COVID-19 testing is essential for:

- 1. Determining whether reopening is safe or economic relief is needed:** COVID-19 testing is a critical input for determining when businesses should remain closed, reopen, or have limited capacity. For any business that is closed or has limited capacity in the interest of public health, economic relief must be provided.
- 2. Helping keep employees healthy and businesses open:** Once businesses can safely reopen, COVID-19 testing enables businesses to offer more stable employment, prevent the spread of COVID-19 when employees or customers contract the virus, and remain open in a way that promotes public health and recovery.
- 3. Preventing frivolous lawsuits:** COVID-19 testing is a ubiquitous component of health and safety guidance throughout the industry. Testing must be accessible, fast, and affordable in order for any businesses to follow the applicable rules that would allow for safe harbor and a strong defense against frivolous lawsuits.
- 4. Promoting safe and healthy travel:** DMOs can more effectively generate demand and promote travel to businesses and destinations that utilize best practices for COVID-19 testing. In addition, DMOs can better work within their communities to restore meetings, conventions, and events if testing is fast and accessible.
- 5. Restoring confidence, generating travel demand, and accelerate rehiring:** With accurate, fast, and widely available testing, America's confidence in traveling safely can be restored. Greater confidence will ensure that travel tax credits, deductions and incentives can work – generating greater demand and ultimately leading to greater reemployment of the travel workforce.

Indeed, accurate, fast, and accessible COVID-19 testing means much more than combating the coronavirus or determining who is infected. **Testing enables reopening. Testing enables rehiring. Testing enables recovery.**

IMPROVE TESTING: A.S.A.P.

Congress, the administration, governors, mayors, health care leaders and more deserve credit for improving COVID-19 testing and contact tracing since the very early days of response to COVID-19. However, in order to more effectively combat the health and mounting economic impacts of the coronavirus, greater efforts are needed to improve the accuracy, speed, and availability of COVID-19 testing. Moreover, these improvements must be accompanied by the development of a national testing strategy to implement coordinated plans at the federal, state, and local level.

The following are the U.S. Travel Association's recommendations for improving the accuracy, speed, accessibility, and planning (A.S.A.P.) for COVID-19 testing, which build upon and incorporate recommendations from public health experts and leading business groups.

Accuracy and Speed of COVID-19 Testing and Data Collection

- **Improve the accuracy and speed of data collection for testing and contact tracing:** Federal agencies' digital infrastructure is outdated and unable to quickly collect and produce public health data that can be used to predict outbreaks and identify areas that require increased testing and federal resources. Congress should increase funding to modernize digital infrastructure at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and other federal agencies to improve COVID-19 data collection and analytical capabilities, which would improve the federal response to COVID-19. States and local governments also require additional federal resources to support more robust capabilities for contact tracing, testing, and data collection and analysis. The allocation of federal resources for tracing, testing, and data collection should be provided in conjunction with guidance that encourages states and localities to adopt uniform and interoperable practices for exposure, contact tracing, and tracking data. This will ensure more uniform and consistent federal response across states. Additionally, funding should support timely, accurate and consistent reporting of testing data between health providers and state, local, and federal public health authorities.

When developing and investing in more uniform and modern data collection, federal, state, and local entities must prioritize systems and protocols that protect personal privacy. This includes prioritizing approaches that limit the collection of personally identifiable information, enforcing restrictions on data transfer, and providing transparency for testing subjects.

- **Increase federal funding for R&D and validation of new, rapid, and accurate tests:** Congress should invest additional resources in the development and validation of rapid and accurate COVID-19 tests and antibody tests. In addition, CDC and HHS should validate testing protocols for viral, serological, antigen, and antibody tests administered remotely, through telehealth or at designated testing sites. Validating new tests and diverse protocols can increase both the scale and speed of testing, reduce delays and backlogs, and provide testing strategies for a wider range of businesses and activities.

Increasing Availability of COVID-19 Testing

- **Invest in expanded production, laboratory capacity and testing sites:** Congress should appropriate additional funding to expand laboratory capacity and operations, support supply chain production, and increase the number public testing sites. These investments are essential for eliminating bottlenecks and reducing the current backlog for processing tests, and for a more sustained reopening of the economy.
- **Increase Access to Worker Testing:** CDC should quickly validate more serological tests and develop clear protocols for administering tests at home or in the workplace. Establishing protocols that rely on both viral and serological testing can increase access to worker testing by providing more cost-effective and timely testing strategies that can be more easily scaled.
- **Develop Digital Tracing & Tracking Tools:** CDC and HHS should develop guidance for digital tracing and tracking tools that can augment traditional methods of contact tracing and tracking. These tools can improve privacy protections and improve data collection and analysis.

Developing a Nationally Coordinated Testing Strategy

The federal government must strengthen its partnership with states and localities to better plan, coordinate, and execute a national testing strategy. Core elements of a national testing strategy should include:

- **Standardized and Interoperable Tracing and Tracking Systems:** The federal government should work with states and localities to develop standardized protocols and interoperable systems for tracing and tracking. While manual methods for tracing and tracking can be more rapidly disseminated, equal priority should be given to the development of digital tracing and tracking systems that can be used now and in any future pandemic. Digital systems can also improve data sharing and analysis among states and at the federal level.
- **Update and Expand CDC Testing Guidelines:** Testing needs and protocols will vary widely depending on business or public use. In addition, as new testing capabilities are developed, existing testing protocols can quickly become outdated. CDC should expand testing guidelines for a wider variety of activities, including in-office work, business travel, conferences, trade shows or large meetings, sporting events, and other areas where testing can increase the level of safe economic activity.

ENDORSEMENT OF THE TEST ACT

In July, Senators Cory Gardner (R-CO), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Mitt Romney (R-UT), and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) introduced the TEST Act. The bill would implement many of U.S. Travel's recommendations to improve the accuracy, speed, availability, and planning for COVID-19 testing.

Specifically, the TEST Act would:

Eliminate blind spots by:

- Ensuring that HHS identifies gaps in current reporting systems and leverage tools, like grants and payment incentives, to address those reporting blind spots.
- Requiring CDC to integrate and update existing systems and networks in collaboration with state, local, tribal, and territorial public health officials to achieve real-time coordination.
- Mandating a timely public meeting with experts to inform strategies on ways to integrate laboratory and epidemiology systems and capabilities to conduct and report on rapid and accurate laboratory tests.
- Improving CDC's ability to address urgent public health crises by directly outlining their authority to hire pathologists, clinical microbiologists, laboratory professionals, and epidemiologists to support disease detection efforts.

Define appropriate federal objectives by:

- Requiring a strategy and implementation plan to identify and demonstrate measurable steps towards conducting rapid and accurate laboratory testing during a public health emergency, especially as they relate to lessons learned from COVID-19.
- Expanding the Epidemiology-Laboratory Capacity Grant Program within CDC to align with public health objectives and support state and local public health department activities related to disease detection.

- Improving the National Health Security Strategy to ensure that integrating laboratory and epidemiology systems and capability to conduct and report on rapid and accurate laboratory tests falls within the definition of essential public health security capability.

Establish accountability by:

- Ensuring congressional oversight with mandated reporting on critical modernization efforts.
- Directing the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to evaluate gaps in CDC's situational awareness capabilities and submit a report with recommendations to Congress.

CALL TO ACTION

Improving the accuracy, speed, accessibility, and planning for COVID-19 testing and contact tracing is essential for protecting public health and accelerating economic recovery. In the next phase of coronavirus response legislation, Congress should include the TEST Act and provide more robust federal investment in the research, development, distribution, and capacity of COVID-19 testing. The federal government must also continue to provide leadership through developing a national strategy, validating new testing technologies and protocols, and encouraging a more coordinated response at all levels of government.