

DRIVE-THRU TESTING SITE FOR VIRUS OPENS

Location is accessible by those with order from doctor

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An El Paso police officer wearing a medical mask stood guard Wednesday at the city's first drive-thru coronavirus testing site. Orange caution barrels marked the lanes leading the large Emergency Medical Task Force trailer. Two signs announced: "Testing Here" and "Must have ID. Dr's orders."

Those visiting the site were asked to keep their windows up as they sought testing by the 30-person team staffing the testing site.

"Some media have called it a secret location, but it's not," an official at the testing site said. "We just want to make sure that everything is in place and in order. The integrity of the location is important for patient privacy."

The testing site is operated by the city of El Paso's Department of Public Health, the Border Regional Advisory Council, also known as BorderRAC, and other health agencies.

The site officially began operating Monday but a few tests were conducted on Friday. Officials say there are 250 coronavirus testing kits at the site.

Testing here has gone largely unannounced since it began receiving patients on Monday as officials say they want to keep its location confidential. It is the only outpatient testing site in the city.

"In order to protect the public's safety and to maintain patient confidentiality, only vehicles with patients being screened will be allowed access to the site," said Wanda Helgesen, the executive director of the BorderRAC in an email.

"This site will help expand our capacity to test people, but it also will help direct people who do not need emergency room care to be sampled and tested while not overwhelming the health care system."

The El Paso Times requested an over-the-phone interview with Helgesen, but questions were answered by email.

The site is open to health care workers, first responders and patients with a doctor's order who meet testing criteria, according to city officials. It is for people who do not require emergency medical care.

Officials said the address is being given to those with doctor referrals. They are trying to limit traffic near the location as they get the testing facility operation, authorities said.

“Only those members of the community who have met the testing criteria and obtained a doctor's order for testing will be allowed entrance,” Helgesen stated. “The ordering doctor will schedule an appointment for the drive-thru collection site for the patient.”

Helgesen says the region will receive more testing kits in the coming days. But it is unclear when and how many will be given to the El Paso area.

Patients must show identification to be allowed into the testing site, public health officials said. The patient will drive up to a specialist wearing protective gear, who will take a swab from the back of the nostrils.

The patient will be given instructions and directions on how to self-quarantine and stay away from other people, officials said. The process takes about 10 minutes.

Test results from a commercial lab will be sent to the patient's doctor and the Department of Public Health in three to five days.

The doctor will inform the patient whether they are positive for COVID-19. If positive, the patient will be ordered to self-quarantine and the Department of Public Health will conduct an epidemiological investigation.

The New Mexico Department of Health sponsored a drive-thru testing site and began screening individuals for COVID-19 cases Friday. It continued on Monday at the Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine parking lot from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Major cities throughout Texas have also opened drive-thru sites including: Austin, San Antonio, Dallas and Houston.

Further information and details are available at www.EPHealth.com at the COVID-19 page.

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