D.C. Area Universities Deploy COVID-19 Testing Program

New mobile laboratory at Gallaudet University processes tests reliably, quickly; Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners voted Feb. 23 to join effort

WASHINGTON, D.C. (February 24, 2021) — American University and the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area today launched an innovative saliva-based COVID testing system with a mobile laboratory at Gallaudet University in Northeast Washington.

Expanded testing is a critical component of reducing the spread of COVID-19 and safeguarding our communities, and the mobile lab offers an accurate, affordable, and convenient saliva-based test.

Starting as early as March 1, the mobile lab has the capacity to process more than 50,000 COVID-19 tests per week, which will support safe, in-person operations at the participating institutions.

This collaboration is an innovative approach for universities and community partners to both address their specific needs and serve the broader region, with a focus on supporting the reopening of secondary schools.

The partnership showcases new ways that universities support the D.C. community, with American University funding the mobile laboratory and Gallaudet University providing the physical space and utility hook-ups for its operation.

American, Catholic, Marymount, and Gallaudet universities plan to use 5,000 of those tests per week initially. The Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners voted to join the effort at its meeting Feb. 23.

“Robust COVID-19 testing is essential to the health and safety of the American University community and the entire D.C. region. Bringing together universities, K-12 schools, and community organizations to provide testing will increase knowledge about the virus, help prevent further community spread, and advance in-person activity.” said Sylvia Burwell, President of American University and former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “By utilizing the diverse expertise of the collaborating institutions, we can address critical public health needs and support the communities where we live, work, and learn.”

The Consortium testing program is a vital part of reopening plans for Baltimore City Public Schools, and additional area schools and institutions are invited to join the effort. Participating organizations determine the frequency of testing for their communities.
"A proactive approach is the most prudent way to protect students and staff from COVID-19. The health screenings developed through Consortium are the early detection system that we need to assure families and staff that our learning spaces are safe," said Dr. Sonja Brookins Santelises, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools. "We are pleased to partner with the Consortium and support this important work."

Developed in partnership with researchers at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the test requires only a deposit of saliva instead of an intrusive nasal swab. Trained medical personnel are not needed to administer the test, saving partners considerable money. The test takes minutes to administer and aims to generate results within eight hours of the test being delivered to the mobile laboratory.

Further, this PCR test looks for three genes (N, S, and ORF1ab) present in the coronavirus, versus other tests which look for just one, earning it high specificity and very few false positives. It also helps with detection of some of the British variant.

At the end of December 2020, research began showing that in individuals infected with the B117 strain of SARS-CoV-2 (the British variant) the S-Gene was “dropping out” from detection. This three-gene test observes such S-gene dropout, allowing the test to identify individuals that likely have this mutation.

The new lab also enables schools to collect saliva samples at their own sites, eliminating the time-consuming commute to various testing locations by hundreds of employees, staff, or students. The samples are then transported to the mobile laboratory at Gallaudet for rapid processing.

“We have worked hard to make testing widely available to the community through the universities we serve, as testing is a critical component in slowing the spread of COVID-19,” said Andrew Flagel, Ph.D., President and CEO of the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area. “We are pleased to partner with our members to bring this new testing option to D.C., and we ask any schools interested in participating to contact us.”

One of the largest and most diverse educational alliances, the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area provides channels for innovation, efficiency, and advocacy among members and across government and business sectors. Representing the 17 accredited colleges and universities across the National Capital Region, the Consortium promotes the global reputation of its members, offering a focal point for promoting access, social mobility, and equitable economic development.

Additional quotes:

“Catholic University’s partnership with consortium schools to bring testing to Washington, D.C. is an invaluable opportunity to band together as a community against the spread of Covid. By working cooperatively to create access to testing that is quick, accurate, and affordable, we will curtail the spread of the virus among our students and our neighbors. My hope is that many more partners will join us to help keep our community safe and healthy.”

— Catholic University President John Garvey
“Expanding Marymount University’s COVID-19 testing to include asymptomatic community members this past fall was key in allowing our institution to continue to remain open for both in-person learning and on-campus living. As we edge closer to more widespread vaccination opportunities later this year, rapid and accurate testing remains crucial to protecting our students, faculty, staff and community partners. We are proud to team up with our fellow consortium members in promoting and utilizing the advanced testing technology.”

— Dr. Irma Becerra, President of Marymount University

“Gallaudet University is honored to host the mobile laboratory on our bilingual campus. We look forward to joining with our Consortium partners, the Smithsonian museums, and other entities to make easy-to-administer, accurate, and low-cost COVID-19 testing available to our constituencies. This brings us one step closer to stopping the spread of the coronavirus and to resuming the face-to-face interaction that is so important to the vibrancy of our campuses and communities.”

— Roberta J. Cordano, President, Gallaudet University

“The Rockefeller Foundation is pleased to support the Consortium and its effort to ensure our nations’ public schools have access to Covid-19 tests – a key frontline defense as schools return to the classroom. The testing infrastructure enabled by the Consortium can continue to be leveraged by public schools throughout the region, creating a scalable model for the rest of the country.”

— Dr. Rajiv J. Shah, President of The Rockefeller Foundation

**Link to COVID Mobile Lab Photos:** Photo Credit: Jeffrey Watts/American University

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