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Read any good Covid tests lately?

by Ron Charles | Sept. 12, 2021

If you live in Ohio, your public librarian can help out. An innovative program funded by the Ohio Department of Health is offering Abbott BinaxNOW home covid tests for free through the state's libraries. In August, 246 library locations gave away more than 53,000 tests. This sounds incredible to me. (I've paid about \$24 a piece for Abbott BinaxNOW test kits at CVS.) The program has the enthusiastic support of Republican Gov. Mike DeWine (Delaware and D.C. have similar programs with their public library systems.) Mission creep? For Ohio Library Council executive director Michelle Francis, distributing covid tests is nothing out of the ordinary.

"This is just someone checking something out," she tells me. "The only thing is they're not returning it." The program reflects how broadly librarians interpret their role. "Libraries do so much more than books," Francis says. "Yes, books are still extremely important, and literacy is at the core of what we do, but we are prepared to be the center of the community."

Ohio librarians have been hearing from teens who want to go on college visits, musicians who want to get together to play, actors who want to go to auditions, family members who want to visit relatives undergoing cancer treatment — all kinds of people who need a negative covid test.

"Our libraries, they're doing what they do best: providing a community resource," Francis says. Using the library to distribute these home tests has all kinds of advantages over other methods. People may not have transportation to the local health department or even know where it is. And some are too afraid to ask for a test. "Well," Francis says, "they're not afraid to ask our libraries because they trust us."



Ohio's strong libraries were prepared to step up

by Meredith Schwartz | May 3, 2021

Even as the United States vaccine rollout has picked up speed—at press time, every American adult had become eligible—the country still has a long way to go to reach herd immunity. And with several more contagious variants spreading, access to testing is important. So I've been delighted to watch the ambitious program in Ohio, in which 137 of the state's 251 library systems (and counting) have chosen to help distribute about 2 million at-home coronavirus testing kits. At press time, libraries had already distributed nearly 60,000 tests through about 365 locations.

It's heartening to see libraries making a difference in patrons getting prompt care, especially when they also help redress inequities in pandemic response. As Ohio Library Council (OLC) Executive Director Michelle Francis tells me, a key purpose of this initiative is to get kits into the hands of people who could not otherwise travel to get a test, or afford the \$25 retail price. Francis shares anecdotes of patrons who not only get peace of mind about their health, but use the tests to prove they can safely go back to work, or gather with family for holidays.

It's also heartening to learn that this program came about because public officials already knew the tremendous value that libraries bring as trusted institutions. The very first library in Ohio to distribute the testing kits did so because the local health department commissioner, Kate Seifert, reached out, knowing that the small Bucyrus Public Library would be happy to help. Library Director Stephanie Buchanan began giving out the tests in early February and has averaged 10 a week since; a good amount, she says, for her rural area. From there, says Buchanan, conversation among health department commissioners brought the idea of libraries as a distribution channel to the governor's office's attention.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, a longtime library supporter, and the state department of health approached the OLC to recruit more libraries when health departments and sheriff's offices didn't have the scale to distribute enough tests. DeWine's previous work with libraries on literacy, fighting scams that target seniors, and the opioid epidemic meant he already knew "the reach that we could have; that public libraries could be key access points and partners for getting this out in the community," says Francis.

Within two weeks the Council had created a webinar spotlighting the work of Bucyrus and other early adopter libraries, recruited a cohort of volunteers (still growing), and started moving tests out the door (or the drive-thru window).

Because Ohio has historically provided robust support for its public libraries, in its time of need those institutions were ready and able, as well as willing, to step up to this new challenge.

I wish that were equally true of all our civic institutions. COVID-19 has brought home how uneven America's infrastructure can be, in how many arenas—from schools to healthcare to housing—and how ineffective a strategy it is to wait until a crisis comes and only then start to shore it up.

Francis tells me that other states have approached Ohio about replicating this program. I hope they succeed. I also hope, if they do not already fund their libraries at the same level Ohio has, that they take from this two lessons: that their libraries need support, day in and day out, to be ready when emergencies happen, and that libraries are go-to partners on any governmental priority that needs to connect to community members at scale.

This reminder of how libraries serve as crucial infrastructure makes me think of President Biden's American Jobs Plan. While I was disappointed that libraries were not included among the sites to be built, preserved, and retrofitted, the larger framing of the initiative will serve libraries well. Defining infrastructure as more than physical plant, encompassing services that people rely on, can only help libraries, which provide and connect to so many programs that meet fundamental needs.

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