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Northern Michigan Regional Laboratory Awareness Notice

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is excited to report that operations at the Northern Michigan Regional Laboratory have shifted to support and prioritize COVID-19 testing. Increased testing capacity and expanding testing criteria will provide us with more information and the ability to better understand where COVID-19 is and how it could be spreading in our communities.

The Northern Michigan Regional Laboratory was established in 2004, after the events of 9/11 and identification of other national terrorist threats or acts. This lab was originally established as part of Michigan's Regional Lab Network to conduct proficiency testing for biological threat agents. As funding for the program decreased, the Health Department of Northwest Michigan shifted laboratory resources to address the regional need for water quality testing. Additionally, the lab provided testing of surface water for public beach programs in Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. These changes were initiated in 2006 and water quality as well as surface water testing continues today, conducting over 10,000 tests annually.

Despite the changing operations of the lab through the years, the qualified and certified staff have remained, and all equipment has been maintained, upgraded, and certified appropriately. As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded and COVID-19 made its way to Northern Michigan, leadership at the health department began to explore the option of utilizing this regional lab to run COVID-19 tests with the intent of increasing testing capacity in Northern Michigan.

Thanks to the ongoing partnership with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), Bureau of Laboratories and the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA), the Health Department of Northwest Michigan was able to re-establish the appropriate level of lab certification and obtain the necessary supplies and equipment to begin running tests for COVID-19 allowing for increased capacity for testing in northern Michigan.

"It is incredible that we identified the need for rapid testing in our area and quickly acknowledged our capabilities to stand our lab up as a COVID-19 lab. The Health Department of Northwest Michigan continually put its full effort toward the project," said Scott Kendzierski, Director of Environmental Health Services. "Now, just weeks later, we have a tremendous resource in Northern Michigan to quickly test and promptly take appropriate public health actions to isolate infected individuals and reduce the spread of the disease. We are grateful for the support of MDHHS and the expertise of our lab staff which has really made this possible!"

The combination of rapid and high-volume testing technology provided through the support of MDHHS and the Health Department of Northwest Michigan will eventually allow the regional lab the capability to run nearly 70 tests daily. Although supplies such as reagents, swabs, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) continue to be constrained, we know that once these items are fully available our capabilities will increase to this potential. Utilizing the rapid testing device nearly 20 tests a day can be

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reported out within minutes, and the high-volume unit will allow for another 48 to be reported out in less than 24 hours.

“Having access to rapid test results allows us to intervene quickly when timing is critical, such as a potential case in a congregate living setting,” says Amanda Thompson, Director of Family Health Services at the Health Department of Northwest Michigan.

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan has begun working with partner health departments in the region to develop a plan for the best use of these testing capabilities to prioritize testing of high risk groups such as those living in congregate settings and critical infrastructure workers that are directly supporting vulnerable populations.

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