

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

January 20, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

As vaccines roll out across the country, our nation will still need a robust COVID-19 testing strategy to monitor and contain the virus. An easily accessible test with a fast result that can be taken at home or in the workplace, without a prescription, could help Americans minimize the risk of infection while allowing our communities and Main Street businesses to operate safely. Rapid at-home antigen testing is another tool in the toolbox we can use to regain normalcy.

Since the beginning of this crisis, the New Democrat Coalition has been laser-focused¹ on enacting a national recovery strategy² through widespread, coordinated testing, tracing, and containment. We write today to respectfully request your administration embrace this important public health tool as a key part of your national testing strategy. Inexpensive, home antigen testing that provides quick results is an effective way to reduce community spread of COVID-19, giving individuals a tool to find out whether they are contagious to others and stay home when they are likely to spread the disease. At scale, regular rapid antigen testing will help us safely reopen schools and protect at-risk populations like those in prisons or long-term care facilities. In order to accomplish these shared goals, we ask the Biden administration to take action in your first week to expand rapid antigen testing capacity, deployment, and use.

Regularly performed, at-home testing helps individuals make informed decisions. We know testing is a critical strategy for controlling the spread of COVID-19, yet the U.S. is still not using it effectively. Our current reliance on PCR testing means we do too few tests and get results too late to prevent individuals from unknowingly spreading infection, and too late to perform effective contact tracing and isolation. No single testing regimen or prevention technique is entirely effective on its own, but frequent home testing will catch infectious asymptomatic people who might not otherwise get tested, or who become infectious following a negative PCR test. To get a handle on this disease, we need to starve the virus. Keeping contagious individuals out of work, school, and community settings will help accomplish this.

The public health and economic impacts of this virus have disproportionately fallen on the shoulders of communities of color. People of color are more likely to be frontline workers, placing them and their families at higher risk for infection. For those who live in

¹ <https://newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/new-democrat-coalition-urges-house-and-committee-leadership-to-act>

² <https://newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/new-democrat-coalition-urges-house-leadership-to-implement-a-national-recovery-strategy>

multigenerational households, this poses very high risk to elderly relatives. These disparities can, in part, be ameliorated by frequent antigen testing at home or at work to lessen the risk of acquiring or unknowingly spreading COVID-19 in the workplace. Screening tests as people enter schools and essential businesses could stem the spread. To ensure the program's success, tests should be widely available, equitably distributed, and accessible to hard-to-reach and vulnerable populations.

Technologies exist³ to produce simple, inexpensive paper strip rapid antigen tests. However, we lack fast-track FDA emergency use authorization, and adequate investments in manufacturing and distribution. Previously, several Members of Congress asked the FDA to prioritize an approval pathway to ensure these tests can be deployed to the public in a timely manner. We ask your Administration to prioritize the approval and distribution of these inexpensive home tests as a public health tool.

Moreover, we strongly encourage the Biden Administration to enact the Defense Production Act (DPA) to build capacity, sourcing, and manufacturing of the materials needed to make these tests. For example, the DPA could be used to scale-up the production of the nitrocellulose membrane used in these antigen detecting test strips. Schools should also have access to funding for the testing and personal protective equipment they need through the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund.

Communities, businesses, and especially schools would benefit tremendously from smart testing protocols, given that so many children who are infectious remain asymptomatic, and a school classroom by definition congregates people indoors for many hours. Successfully re-opening schools – and keeping them open -- is critical to closing disparities that have been exacerbated by this crisis. It is also critical to protecting students and staff, and getting parents back to work.

Finally, we ask the Biden Administration to invest in public education so people understand how to use and interpret these tests. Public health communication must be clear and consistent.⁴ Rapid testing, and testing in general, is not a guarantee of safety. It is important to explain to the general public that this is one of many tools to reduce risk, along with masks, distancing, and vaccines.

Thank you for the hard work your Administration has already done in creating a comprehensive COVID-19 strategy to safeguard the American public and our economy. We look forward to working together to develop a powerful and effective national testing strategy.

Sincerely,



Kim Schrier, M.D.
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Bill Foster
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

³ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/cheap-daily-covid-tests-could-be-akin-to-vaccine/>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1448586/>

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