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EMS to perform at-home COVID-19 tests in Massachusetts

EMS providers across the state are being trained to administer the tests

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Stefan Geller
[Boston Herald](#)

BOSTON — EMS providers across Massachusetts soon will be able to go directly to people's homes and perform coronavirus tests, a new step that health officials say will help them identify more patients and give them a clearer picture of how widespread the virus is.

"COVID-19 is a public health crisis and one of the biggest problems that we are facing right now is that we're not testing enough patients," said Dr. Scott Goldberg, the director of emergency medical services at Brigham and Women's Hospital. "We don't know the scope of the problem, and until we get people tested we're not going to know how bad it is and how we can best solve it."

As part of a collaborative initiative between Partners HealthCare and EMS services, Goldberg on Saturday held a training course in Dedham, where he showed a group of senior emergency medical technicians with Fallon Ambulance Service how to administer the tests on dummy patients.



A nurse holds swabs and test tube to test people for COVID-19 at a drive through station. In Massachusetts, EMS providers are being trained to soon provide at-home COVID-19 testing across the state. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)

“Every time there’s something new in the health care process, we’re always excited to be a part of it,” said Andrew DeFrias, one of the senior EMTs who participated in the training. “Anything to help with the fight against this pandemic we are happy to do.”

Over the course of an hour, Goldberg demonstrated how to insert swabs into the nose of a would-be patient, broke down particular safety precautions, and had the EMT supervisors go through a trial run of responding to a coronavirus call.

According to Goldberg, they are aiming to launch the initiative within the next few days, but will initially only send out EMT supervisors. Eventually, though, he said that those supervisors will train field paramedics to administer them as well.

“This is all uncharted territory, so we want to make sure that everybody that we’re sending out to potentially interact with a COVID patient is really buttoned up from a safety standpoint,” Goldberg said.

However, Goldberg said that because coronavirus tests are currently a scarce resource, he estimates that they will only be able to serve six to eight patients per day.

“Ultimately, once our ability to test increases — and we hope that that’s going to happen soon — we want to be ready, so that we can get out into the community and test as many people as we possibly can,” Goldberg said.

In addition to better understanding the scope of the virus, Goldberg said an important reason for adopting this change is so potentially infected people don’t visit hospitals and infect medical staff or vulnerable patients.

“We want to keep the bug out, if at all possible. If the only reason a patient is at the hospital is for a test, we want to keep them away and bring the test to them,” he said.

In addition to the availability of the tests, Goldberg said the biggest barrier that prevented them from doing this sooner was that state regulations did not allow for paramedics to perform the tests. However, the state Department of Public Health [updated the protocols](#) on Friday night and cleared the way for them to begin.

“Right now, we’re fighting an unknown enemy. We have no idea how widespread COVID is because we just don’t test enough people,” Goldberg said. “I can’t stress enough how important testing is.”

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