

# **Gov. Baker, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Explore Medical Capacity Expansion**

By Colin A. Young  
State House News Service

Gov. Charlie Baker and Boston Mayor Martin Walsh had “very productive” conversations Saturday with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers around identifying, retrofitting and using college dorms, closed nursing homes and other facilities as extra medical treatment capacity as the coronavirus pandemic continues.

Though the state has already taken drastic steps to slow the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus by limiting social interaction, the government and the health care sector are working to ensure that hospitals and clinics will be able to handle the surge of COVID-19 patients that is expected to accompany a significant increase in testing for the respiratory illness.

The governor said Saturday afternoon that the state’s Coronavirus Command Center, helmed by Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders, has been talking to hospitals to “scenario plan” for an influx of COVID-19 patients, and will now work to pick some sites in Massachusetts that the Army Corps might be able to convert. It would be a few weeks before the Corps would have any such site ready, he said.

“We got a sense for the kind of work that they can do here in the commonwealth and identified – along with several other folks, including people from the private sector – facilities that could possibly be either converted or modified to provide additional medical care capacity as we ramp up to deal with

this virus," Baker said from the State House. He added, "The command center is also working closely with the hospital community on the plans that they're pursuing to develop additional capacity within their four walls."

The governor said some colleges have already expressed a willingness to make dorms available for medical use. The biggest issues, he said, are ensuring that the sites have adequate electricity and water supplies for medical operations. Baker said the Army Corps on Saturday essentially gave the state a "cookbook" that it can use to select sites it wants the Corps to inspect physically.

"This is obviously a mission that our National Guard could assist with as well," he said. The governor recently activated the Guard to help with "logistical support and other assistance" in the state's coronavirus response.

The governor gave an update Saturday on the capacity for testing at the state's public health lab and commercial labs that have been granted approval to conduct testing for the coronavirus.

Between Wednesday and Friday, the governor said, capacity at all labs increased roughly 65 percent, from just under 700 tests on Wednesday to 1,144 on Friday, Baker said. The number of tests actually conducted nearly doubled from 520 tests conducted Wednesday to 962 tests performed Friday, he said.

"And I can tell you based on my own personal discussions with the commercial lab community, their capacity to test is going to continue to grow in significant ways over the course of the next several weeks," Baker said. "I want to remind folks that as the testing numbers go up and the criteria by which you can be tested expands, we certainly expect that we'll see an increase in the number of positive test cases as well."

The state's first large-scale, drive-through testing facility opened Thursday at a CVS in Shrewsbury, and Baker said

Saturday that AFC Urgent Care Waltham had begun to test pre-screened patients. Those types of partnerships, he said, "will play an important role in our overall effort to expand testing capacity across Massachusetts."

By the beginning of the coming week, Baker and Sudders have said, the state's public health lab and commercial labs must get to a point at which they can conduct a minimum of 3,500 tests each day.

"The issue here is to get testing to the point we talked about earlier in the week, where we're doing what we would think of as the same level of testing that you see every single day in other countries where the combination of testing and chasing – testing, isolation, tracing – that's where we need to get to," Baker said Saturday. "And in most of those countries, the way they bent the curve was they bent the curve by testing enough fast enough to be able to catch up to the growth in new cases, and then doing the tracing work and isolating everybody. And that's where we got to get."

New testing numbers released Saturday afternoon by the Department of Public Health showed that 5,277 COVID-19 tests have been performed in Massachusetts – 3,031 by the state public health lab and 2,246 by commercial and other labs – since Feb. 28.

For health care providers, grocery store employees and other essential workers, the governor said Saturday that the state has more than 300 locations ready to provide emergency child care beginning Monday, when all other early education centers and family child care providers must close under an executive order issued by the governor Wednesday.

"We know that child care is an especially critical piece of emergency service and that it allows our frontline workers to continue their battle against COVID-19 and to continue their work. And there are times when our families are on the front

lines and don't have another option for their children," Baker said. He added, "We expect more to come online eventually, but this needs to be implemented safely and the sites should only really be used as a last resort."

More details on the sites will be provided via the state's Department of Early Education and Care website Sunday morning, he said.

Sudders responded during Saturday afternoon's press conference to the news, announced by Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts, that an inmate at the Massachusetts Treatment Center had tested positive of COVID-19. A notice posted on the DOC's website said inmate visits by family and friends have been suspended at the state's 16 correctional facilities.

"The Department of Correction has followed all the protocols around isolating the individual, doing the contact tracing – the people who individuals come in contact with – of those individuals, if they were staff went home and are being tested. [The] place was disinfected," she said. "So we believe that the treatment center followed all the protocols that we do in any other facility where you would have a patient, a person, or in this case an inmate, who was tested positive."