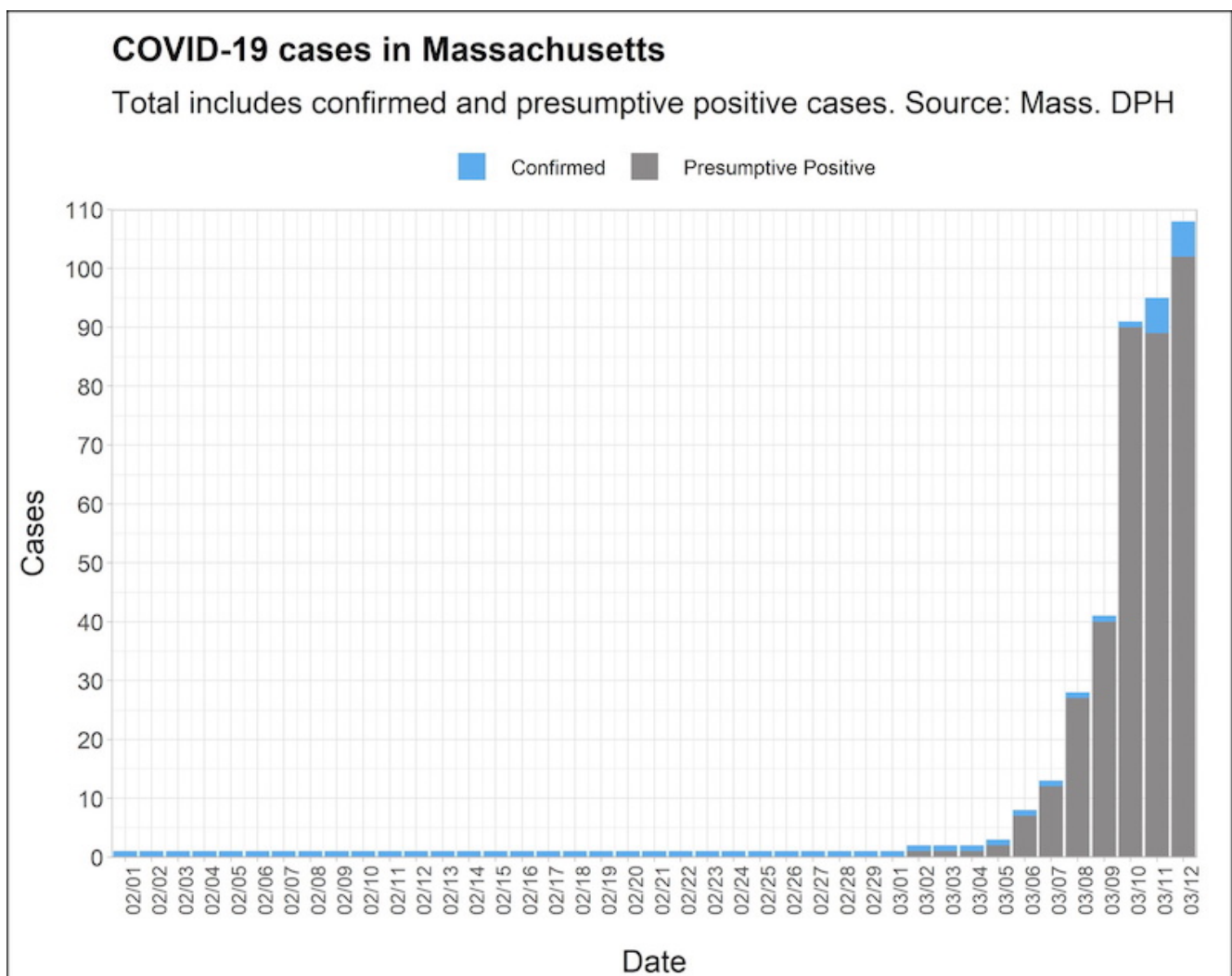


# Coronavirus testing limitations in Massachusetts a growing concern for Governor Baker

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State House News Service

As the state works to manage the spread of the coronavirus, Gov. Charlie Baker on Thursday issued his most forceful call yet for the federal government to allow private labs and hospital facilities to test for the virus as the number of cases statewide climbed to 108.



Testing has emerged as a key aspect of the national response to the outbreak of the newest coronavirus and the COVID-19 respiratory illness it causes. Without enough tests, public health officials are not able to wrap their arms around the full scope of the outbreak.

Guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control generally determine who should be tested, but anecdotal evidence suggests that not all people who have been exposed to the virus qualify to be tested at this point.

After meeting with local officials in Pittsfield, where it appears the coronavirus has spread among the community without a known link to an infected person or high-risk region of the world, Baker said Massachusetts recently got enough testing supplies to test an additional 5,000 people but still needs to significantly ramp up its testing.

"We certainly believe we have what I would describe as an adequate supply today, but as I said in my remarks, we need the federal government – the CDC and FDA in particular – to give hospitals and testing facilities here in Massachusetts that have the capacity to test the material and then the approval they need to actually begin to test themselves," Baker said.

"The fact that the state lab is the single source of testing at this time is not adequate," he said.

Baker would not say exactly how many people have already been tested in Massachusetts, but said the state now has the ability to test 5,000 people in addition to the "several thousand" it had the ability to test before getting the latest supply.

On Tuesday, Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel said the state had recently received enough kits and supplies to test 2,000 new people and had already tested roughly 400 patients. Bharel said an approval from the federal government to

automate part of the testing process would also allow the state to increase its testing capacity from 50 to 200 per day.

“Thankfully, the Massachusetts DPH lab is more advanced than some other states. That enables the lab to now process four times as many samples as it was last week,” Baker said Thursday. “But we need more testing capability. And we need the federal government to get there.”

Baker said his administration has been in touch with the state’s Congressional delegation and the Trump administration about securing approvals for additional testing sites, including hospitals and private labs.

“We have hospitals in eastern Massachusetts, central Massachusetts, western Massachusetts, we have labs not related to hospitals, independent privately operated labs, all of which have the capacity to do this if they can get several requirements and authorizations from the feds,” Baker said.

The number of cases of coronavirus in Massachusetts reached triple digits on Thursday, with the Department of Public Health reporting a total of 108 cases, including six confirmed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. That’s 13 more cases than were reported on Wednesday.

A total of 82 cases, up from 77 a day earlier, are being linked to the Biogen leadership meeting at the Long Wharf Marriott in late February.

Worcester County was the only county with known exposure to COVID-19 to not see an uptick in cases Thursday, while there still have been no reported cases Hampshire, Hampden, Franklin, Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, Dukes and Nantucket counties.

Berkshire County, where Baker was in the afternoon, now has a total of nine cases. Public health officials also added a new category to its tracking to report that eight cases are

associated with Berkshire Medical Center.

At that hospital, Baker said from Pittsfield, officials are concerned about their ability to appropriately staff the facility given the fact that some workers have been quarantined out of concern that they might have been exposed to the coronavirus.

But because of the emergency declaration he ordered this week, Baker said the state's Board of Registration in Nursing "put in place an emergency procedure that will make it possible for licensed out-of-state medical professionals and nurses to get licensed here in Massachusetts in one day."

"One of the things we heard from the delegation and from the mayor about was a more aggressive process for nurses and other medical professionals who are licensed and qualified in other states to be able to get licensed and qualified in Massachusetts quickly," the governor said after meeting with Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyler, Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Sen. Adam Hinds and others.

Hinds tweeted Thursday afternoon that the steps the state has taken so far to help Berkshire County are only the start.

"The Berkshires is the first area of the Commonwealth where we are seeing community transmission of COVID-19 of unknown origin. Approving interstate medical licenses to practice in Massachusetts, supporting public and private labs to test and expedite COVID-19 results, and provide cutting-edge equipment to hospitals and healthcare organizations in our region is just the beginning of what is necessary for the Berkshires to mitigate and curb the virus' spread," the Pittsfield Democrat posted.

Reps. William "Smitty" Pignatelli and John Barrett III, both from the Berkshires, also have filed legislation to create a new fund to assist hourly wage workers who may have to miss work due to infection, quarantine or isolation related to

COVID-19.