

April 19, 2022

An Urgent Request for Accessible Rapid COVID-19 Tests for Vulnerable Populations in Newfoundland and Labrador

Open letter to Department of Health and Community Services

This letter has been developed collaboratively, with input and support from:

- AIDS Committee of Newfoundland and Labrador
- Birth Justice NL
- Canadian Federation of Students Newfoundland and Labrador
- Central Housing and Homelessness Network
- Consumers' Health Awareness Network of Newfoundland and Labrador (CHANNAL)
- Conservation Corps Newfoundland and Labrador
- Corner Brook Status of Women Council
- Elaine Xie, MD, CCFP, Primary Care Physician, Downtown Health Collaborative
- End Homelessness St. John's
- Federation of Medical Women of Canada, St. John's
- First Light St. John's Friendship Centre Inc.
- Food First NL
- Françoise Guigné, MD, CCFP, Downtown Health Collaborative Physician
- Kari Brown, RN, BN, MN, NP, Nurse Practitioner (Harm Reduction/Emergency), Eastern Health
- MUN Medicine Gender and Sexuality Advocacy Interest Group (GSAIG)
- MUN Medicine Simulabs
- MUN Medicine Obstetrical and Gynecology Interest Group
- Nancy Biles, Public Health Nurse
- Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network
- NorPen Status of Women Council
- Planned Parenthood NL Sexual Health Centre
- Public Legal Information Association of Newfoundland and Labrador
- Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women Newfoundland and Labrador
- Quadrangle NL
- Social Justice Co-operative of Newfoundland and Labrador
- Status of Women Central
- Stella's Circle
- St. John's Status of Women Council (Women's Centre, Marguerite's Place, Safe Harbour Outreach Project & Managed Alcohol Program)
- The Journey Project
- Violence Prevention-Avalon East
- Virtual Patient Navigator (VPN) AI
- YWCA St. John's
- Vine Place Community Centre
- Workers' Action Network of Newfoundland and Labrador

Summary & Context

Due to recent shifts in provincial policies on PCR eligibility, many individuals in vulnerable populations in our province are not eligible for a PCR test if they develop symptoms of COVID-19 without a known close contact. Furthermore, even when PCR tests were more accessible, significant human resources were involved with arranging testing for an underserved vulnerable person in our community. We know that providing as much healthcare in one location and meeting a person “where they are” is patient- and client-centered and the standard of care.

Public health advice is to use rapid tests if a person is not eligible for PCR tests. This is the only way that a person with symptoms of COVID-19 can leave isolation before 7-10 days. Currently, individuals can only access rapid tests two ways:

1. If they have (or are related to) school-aged children in their care,
2. Purchasing them privately.

These options are not accessible, equitable, or sustainable. The lack of provision of rapid tests by our provincial government presents a number of concerns to vulnerable populations across Newfoundland and Labrador. Testing is an important public health measure to limit spread of COVID-19 by ensuring positive cases are isolating appropriately. Rapid tests kits have been made available free of charge to the general public in many other provinces. We are urgently requesting that the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador explore accessible and sustainable options to ensure availability of free rapid tests to vulnerable populations across Newfoundland and Labrador.

Concerns around lack of access to rapid tests for vulnerable populations

Vulnerable populations include those who are 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomers, women and/or folks of marginalized genders, sex workers, living with disabilities, both young and senior, homeless and vulnerably housed, frontline low-wage workers, and/or those living in poverty. Many people in these populations cannot access PCR tests based on changing testing requirements or ongoing transportation and system navigation barriers. They also cannot afford cost-prohibitive rapid tests particularly if they are required to take multiple tests.

The Canadian Red Cross has offered provision of rapid tests to some community organizations across the province, which has acted as an immediate stop-gap for our lack of access. However, shipments of tests are unpredictable, quantities are limited, and the lifespan of this program ends in April of 2022. Community agencies are struggling to meet the mounting client demand for rapid tests while ensuring staff working closest with these individuals are supported with rapid tests. In most cases, non-profit agencies do not have budgets to provide tests for staff or clients.

Impacts to social determinants of health felt across the province

The lack of provision of rapid tests from our provincial government for vulnerable and general populations produces both acute and widespread consequences. The impacts we are seeing in the community include increased isolation and barriers for engaging in community supports, which is disproportionately experienced by people who are vulnerable and immunocompromised.

The cost of rapid tests in these contexts is truly prohibitive, particularly for those receiving Income Support. Complying with government recommended advice, two tests when symptomatic costs approximately \$30. Feeling sick twice in a month, as many of us do, would use up more than 10% of a single person's monthly income at the base rate. For many, this means accessing rapid tests would compromise their financial ability to pay for food, shelter, and heat - all of which come with downstream health consequences.

For those who cannot access and/or cannot afford rapid tests, they must isolate potentially longer than they need to, meaning lost wages and a loss of access to social supports (e.g. childcare, education, community supports, etc.) Alternatively, people who cannot access or afford tests continue to interact in their communities, while increasing exposure to others who also experience vulnerabilities. This is especially true of low-wage workers with no access to paid sick days. This lack of availability compounds the economic struggles, and mental health challenges for those who are already experiencing vulnerability, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The provincial government's lack of rapid test provision impedes the ongoing access to routine and critical healthcare services for people who need them most. As one example, in the St. John's Metro Region, the Downtown Healthcare Collaborative (DHCC) is struggling to support those who are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 as they have no way to provide rapid tests to this population. This includes supporting prenatal populations who are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. The DHCC cannot currently advise on whether or not a person has or continues to have the COVID-19 virus and is therefore limited in their ability to support in advising on an appropriate care plan.

Recommendations

As community agencies and healthcare professionals, we strongly recommend an immediate investment in accessible and sustainable access to rapid tests for vulnerable populations in our province. Specifically, we recommend:

- Offering a sustainable, free supply of rapid tests to community organizations across Newfoundland and Labrador so that rapid tests can be readily dispersed to program participants and community members as they are needed.
- Offering a sustainable supply of rapid tests to healthcare authorities so that they can provide tests through community healthcare providers. There is an opportunity to

replicate the successful model of administering rapid tests through school districts in the community sector and in healthcare services (and beyond) across the province.

- In regions where there are limited community agencies/healthcare providers, offering rapid tests through libraries, grocery stores, or through a mobile option to vulnerable populations.

Summary

At this stage in the pandemic, with the removal of our mask mandate, provision of rapid tests for both vulnerable people and our general population is essential. Prioritizing access to rapid tests for our most vulnerable communities will contribute to COVID-19 risk mitigation for the entirety of our province.

Ultimately, rapid tests are a critical harm reduction tool, particularly for people who belong to vulnerable populations, to ensure equitable access to essential services. We believe that rapid test provision is a responsibility of the provincial government, aligning with other pre-existing decisions to protect the social determinants of health for vulnerable populations. **We look forward to discussing this matter in more depth with members of the Department of Health and Community Services and collaborating on a solution that meets the urgent needs of vulnerable populations in our province.**

Contact

Bridget Clarke
Advocacy Coordinator, St. John's Status of Women Council
bridget@sjwomenscentre.ca