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## Mobile COVID-19 testing 'finally' comes to Toronto's hardest-hit region

By **Kate Allen** Science and Technology Reporter

Thu., July 16, 2020 | 2 min. read

Mobile testing is finally coming to the northwest region of Toronto, an initiative that health leaders have advocated for to better support the communities hardest hit by the inequitable burden of COVID-19.

Saturday's pop-up site near Jane St. and Steeles Ave. W. will make low-barrier testing available in an area where some neighbourhoods have case rates more than 10 times higher than the least-affected parts of the city — a disproportionate infection risk linked to systemic disadvantages.

"The fact that our community is being highlighted right now for so many reasons, I'm hoping that it will result in more sustainable resources being brought here," says Michelle Westin, senior analyst for planning, quality and risk at Black Creek Community Health Centre.

"We need to keep shining a light on this community. People are dying up here."

In Toronto, the neighbourhoods with the highest COVID-19 case rates all cluster in the northwest corner. A [Star story showed](#) that these neighbourhoods also have high proportions of inadequate housing, front-line low-wage workers, and poor access to health care. And yet mobile testing, an innovation made available weeks ago in less burdened neighbourhoods, had not yet materialized in the northwest — until now.

Last week, the chair of the Toronto Board of Health [sent a letter](#) to the province asking for more resources to support this area, including access to mobile testing and funding to provide alternative accommodations for people who can't safely self-isolate in overcrowded homes. Ontario Health Minister Christine Elliott [promised help with mobile testing the next day](#). The single-day pop-up is a partnership between the Black Creek Community Health Centre, Toronto Public Health and Ontario Health.

"We've been clear in our requests for proactive testing and I'm glad to see it finally going in," said Coun. Joe Cressy, chair of the city's board of health.

Because the city is also collecting socio-demographic and race-based data on new COVID-19 cases, Cressy said this targeted testing would help Toronto Public Health shape its response.

"Testing will help us identify whether there are certain workplaces that need enhanced protection, or certain multi-unit housing that require self-isolation alternatives."

Westin noted that some of the people most at risk of infection — workers whose jobs require them to be on site, and sometimes put them at risk — are also likelier to have a harder time accessing assessment centres with fixed hours. Flexible locations and times of day would help them. In other cases, stigma associated with testing and fear of hospitals keeps people away. The pop-up testing site is a familiar location in the neighbourhood, which she hopes will help alleviate some of those issues.

Westin and Cressy both said they hoped mobile testing will become a regular occurrence.

"What we're hoping is that this is not a one-time clinic," said Westin, who noted that the community health centre had been in discussions with the province and the city about mobile testing for "quite a while."

"In order to prevent a second wave, we really need mobile testing as an ongoing service for the community."

The pop-up community testing site will be open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Christian Centre Church at 4545 Jane St.; no appointment is necessary.



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