

Slow uptake for rapid-testing pilot - MTS president quoted

Slow uptake for rapid-testing pilot Accessibility concerns remain for school staff in rural and northern regions

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RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Ruth MacKenzie says she was pleasantly surprised by the process of booking a COVID-19 test through the Fast Pass program for school staff.

Manitoba's first rapid testing site had no shortage of available appointments for school staffers during its inaugural week of operations. Yet, same-day tests remain out of reach for teachers who want them in the province's COVID-19 hotspot.

Between Jan. 18-24, the province took 111 nasal swab samples — an average of 16 each day — at the rapid testing site at 1066 Nairn Ave. in Winnipeg.

The province set an initial goal of completing 20-40 tests daily, with an aim to ramp up to 160/day in the coming months, when it unveiled details about the "Fast Pass" pilot project earlier this month.

The number of tests administered during the first week reflect the number of appointments that have been made, a provincial spokesperson said Monday, adding there have been no processing nor administrative issues at the site.

Ruth MacKenzie was among the educators who booked an appointment for Monday morning, after she woke up with a sore throat.

The educational assistant said she was offered numerous times when she called the booking line (1-855-268-4318) at 7:30 a.m. She picked a 10:30 a.m. slot so she could travel to Winnipeg.

MacKenzie said she was pleasantly surprised by how easy the appointment was to set up, the test itself — which took under seven minutes, and that she was told to expect a result within hours.

"It's nice to know there's a place you can go and get tested and get back to work as soon as possible," she said. "I love my job. I enjoy it very much. I'm very thankful that I'm working."

The Monday experience was a stark contrast to her first COVID-19 test in the summertime. MacKenzie waited an hour-and-a-half before she was able to get her nasal cavity swabbed, and two days to receive a result in early August.

For a positive result at the rapid site, it takes four to eight hours before the notice is posted online. Negative results take longer because they are to be verified at a lab.

The province retests the latter because, according to a provincial spokesperson, the Songbird Hyris bCUBE rapid test is new to Manitoba, and many rapid-test types have been shown to have a higher volume of false negatives.

The spokesperson said the turnaround for official negative results are "aligned" with those for the general testing stream; the current response time for a test processed at community sites, including the adjacent drive-thru site on Nairn Avenue, is 1-2 days.

The Fast Pass site was originally open only to school staff, including teachers, educational assistants, custodians, bus drivers and workers in school-based early learning and child care facilities in Winnipeg, Seven Oaks, River East Transcona, Seine River and Hanover divisions.

Over the weekend, the province broadened eligibility criteria to give all school employees in Manitoba access to quick turnaround tests, citing its ability to increase the number of daily appointments. Such an expansion was anticipated to take place in February.

The president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society said Monday he is pleased the pilot has been expanded on behalf of teachers in the metro region and those who live nearby, but noted educators work all over the province.

There are concerns about test accessibility in rural and northern regions, said James Bedford, who represents 16,000 public school teachers.

The province has hinted Winkler and Brandon could be home to future rapid test facilities.

"We need to recognize that we can't ignore the northern part of the province," Bedford said.

To date, 27 students have graduated from Red River College with a micro-credential in how to administer rapid COVID-19 tests.

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