

North Country HealthCare Expanding Capacity for COVID-19 Testing

Evaluation Report 10 October 2021

Report prepared for North Country Healthcare by:





NORTH COUNTRY
HealthCare

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose | In May 2020, North Country HealthCare (NCHC) received funding through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to maintain and expand its COVID-19 testing program at clinic locations across its three regional hubs in Northern Arizona. NCHC's service area includes 16 clinics in 12 communities across 5 counties in Northern Arizona, serving approximately 55,000 patients. With CARES Act funding, NCHC established dedicated testing to staff curbside COVID-19 testing efforts at clinic locations and testing events in conjunction with community partners. NCHC aimed to accomplish three primary goals: 1) Expand COVID-19 testing capacity at all NCHC locations; 2) Enhance access to COVID-19 testing for gap and vulnerable populations; and 3) Develop and disseminate a COVID-19 Testing Employer Toolkit for small businesses and non-profits.

Evaluation | In collaboration with NCHC, the Northern Arizona University Center for Health Equity Research (NAU-CHER) evaluated the process and impacts of NCHC Expanded COVID-19 Testing efforts, as well as the NCHC COVID-19 Testing Employer Toolkit using patient surveys, Electronic Health Record (EHR) and employer interviews.

Key Findings

- NCHC significantly expanded its COVID-19 testing capacity in all regions, from completing 23 tests in March 2020 to 738 tests in September 2021, for a total of 8446 completed tests for COVID-19.
- Total NCHC COVID-19 tests have followed the case rate trend for Northern Arizona.
- The NCHC Expanded COVID-19 Testing Program successfully increased access to testing for many gap and vulnerable populations across Northern Arizona, particularly among unsheltered and low-income populations, American Indian and Hispanic residents.
- The COVID-19 Testing Employer Toolkit increased awareness of NCHC as a testing resource and improved employers' response to COVID-19 in the workplace.

Recommendations

- Continue to provide COVID-19 testing services across all NCHC regions.
- Continue partnership with Flagstaff Shelter Services to provide testing for individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Continue to expand targeted outreach and testing with chronically ill, co-morbid, and elderly NCHC patients who are at greatest risk for severe complications from COVID-19.
- Continue to embed evaluation into workflow inclusive of dedicated paid staff to ensure consistent survey delivery and accurate data entry within EHR and Smartsheet data for analysis.

OVERVIEW

North Country HealthCare Expanding COVID-19 Testing Capacity Evaluation
Report 10 | Data as of September 30, 2021

Project Overview

This project reflects the North Country HealthCare's (NCHC) use of funding for Expanding Capacity for Corona Virus Testing under federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act Funding. NCHC's service area includes 16 clinics in 12 communities across 5 counties in northern Arizona, serving approximately 55,000 patients through approximately 203,000 clinic visits. With CARES Act funding, NCHC established dedicated testing teams in three regional hubs, who staff curbside COVID-19 testing efforts at clinic locations as well as plan and implement testing in conjunction with community partners. Teams also coordinate with the county health departments and hospitals as needed. NCHC is focusing on enhancing access to COVID-19 testing for gap and vulnerable populations.

Evaluation Overview

Researchers at Northern Arizona University Center for Health Equity Research (NAU-CHER), in collaboration with NCHC staff, developed a quantitative survey instrument to evaluate NCHC's expanded COVID-19 testing program. Questionnaires have been administered by NCHC staff to a subset of patients receiving COVID-19 tests at NCHC clinic, curbside, and testing event locations since July 25, 2020. The survey includes 26 questions covering demographic information (name, date of birth, gender, orientation, race, ethnicity, health insurance type, and general health status), as well as COVID-19 specific information related to health behaviors (washing hands, wearing a mask, staying home, social distancing, quarantining away from family, and reducing physical contact with others), COVID-19 exposures (experiencing symptoms, a household member experiencing symptoms, having contact with COVID-positive individual, staying in a group living setting), and testing history (how they learned about NCHC testing, if previously tested, results from previous test, and place of previous testing). After reviewing the initial evaluation report (assessing data through November 30, 2020) with NCHC staff and NAU-CHER researchers, some modifications were made to the survey (see Appendix A for updated version). These changes to the survey - which

went into effect in February 2021 - include the following: clarifying the language on a prevention behavior question about reducing physical contact; adding a question about why the patient is getting a COVID-19 test; adding a question about receptivity to the COVID-19 vaccine; and modifying the flu-related questions to reflect the current flu season. HIPPA-protected information will be transferred to NAU-CHER researchers and stored on a secure server at NAU. NAU-CHER researchers will analyze survey data as well as general COVID-19 testing trends (collected on all clients tested) among NCHC regional facilities and provide monthly summary-style reports.

Limitations

The surveys are conducted with a convenience sample of NCHC clients receiving a COVID-19 test. Consequently, the survey data is not randomized and may not be generalizable to the total tested population. Also, not all respondents complete every question on the survey, resulting in a different N value for most questions. Finally, an in-depth analysis comparing survey responses with matched secure demographic data was not possible due to inconsistencies in data entry for name and date of birth in NCHC records.

NCHC TESTING TRENDS

- A total of 8446 COVID-19 tests were completed at NCHC locations across Northern Arizona between March 19, 2020 - September 30, 2021.
- Over this period, 86% of total tests were negative for COVID-19. The percentage of tests that were positive for COVID-19 peaked in January 2021, at 24%.
- Overall NCHC testing trends are similar to the COVID-19 case rate in Northern Arizona counties served by NCHC¹ (Figure 1).

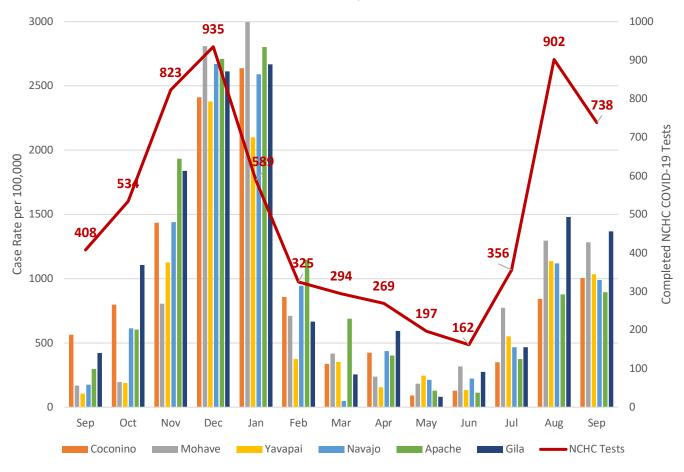
September 2021 Highlights

16% of tests were positive, up from an average percent positivity of 6% in March - June.

Total tests remained high (n=738), reflecting a continued demand for COVID-19 testing in the region (Figure 1).

NCHC COVID-19 testing has shifted focus to primarily serve established clients and NCHC employees.

Figure 1. COVID-19 Case Rate by County (per 100,000) with Total NCHC COVID-19 Tests (Sept 2020 - Sept 2021)



Regional Breakdown

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in total tests by region over time. Of the total 8446 COVID-19 tests, 49% were from the Central Region, 26% from the Eastern Region and 25% from the Western Region. (Regions described and mapped in Table 1 and Figure 3). The Central and Western Regions recorded their **highest ever monthly totals** in August 2021, and remained high into September (Figure 2).

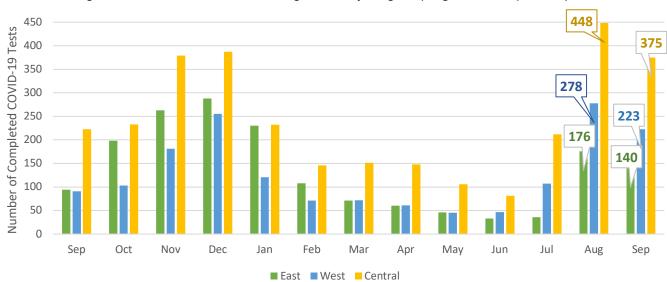


Figure 2. NCHC COVID-19 Testing Totals by Region (Aug 2020 - Sept 2021)

Figure 3. NCHC Locations



Table 1. NCHC Regions

Region	Communities
Eastern	Round Valley, Show
Edsteili	Low, Payson, Holbrook, Winslow
Central	Flagstaff, Grand Canyon
Western	Williams, Seligman, Lake Havasu City, Kingman, Bullhead City

SURVEY RESULTS SUMMARY

COVID-19 Survey Completion

Final summary of survey data: This final report will focus on trends over the past six months, to provide a picture of current COVID-19 testing and prevention behaviors, which have changed as a result of the widely available and effective COVID-19 vaccine.

* Also, due to limited responses, September survey data will be excluded from analysis.

Between July 25, 2020 and September 30, 2021, a total of 1938 surveys were completed among a subset of the 8446 patients who received COVID-19 tests at NCHC locations across Northern Arizona during this period. Surveys are categorized by testing event type: curbside or Blitz* event, or rarely as "other" (Figure 4). NCHC recently shifted focus from community and curbside testing events, to primarily serving their existing patient population and staff.

Highlights

In September, only **3 (0.4%)** tested patients completed a survey (Figure 4). The Mar - Sept 2021 survey completion rate was 13%, much lower than the overall rate of 25%.

This low completion rate is likely due to recent changes in the NCHC COVID-19 testing workflow, which no longer has dedicated staff to administer the survey.

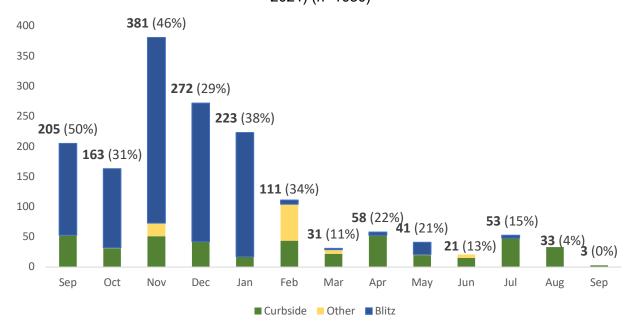


Figure 4. COVID-19 Surveys Completed by Event Type and as (%) of Total Tests (Sept 2020 - Sept 2021) (n=1630)

^{*}Blitz includes events held at homeless shelters, shelter hotels and partner locations (congregate settings).

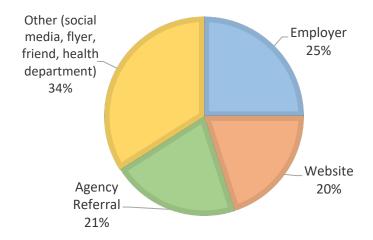
Awareness of NCHC Testing

Overall, **Agency Referral** has been the most cited source of information about testing at NCHC by surveyed patients (42%, N=1935); however, in July and August 2021, it accounted for an average of just 7% of surveys.

Highlights

Since March 2021, the most cited source for finding out about NCHC testing has been employers (25%), followed by the NCHC website (21%) and agency referral (19%) (Figure 5).





Previous Testing

- Over half (55%) of surveyed patients reported getting previous COVID-19 tests at a NCHC location (N=1113) (Figure 6).
- The percentage of surveyed patients returning to NCHC for COVID-19 testing averaged 46% from April-July and increased to 79% in August 2021. This shift may be accounted for by the changing focus of NCHC COVID-19 testing, from curbside and blitz events to serving established NCHC clients and employees in the clinic setting.

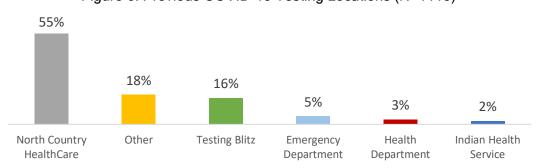
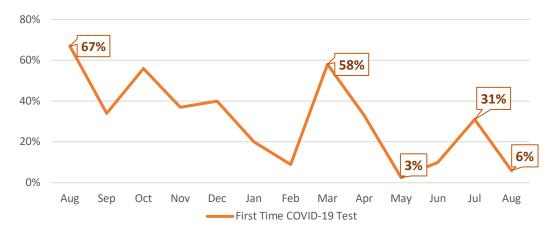


Figure 6. Previous COVID-19 Testing Locations (N=1113)

 First-time COVID-19 tests have fallen significantly since March 2021, from 58% to 6% of tests (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Change in Reported First-Time COVID-19 Tests, Aug 2020 - Aug 2021 (N=1924)



Prior Results

- 40% of all survey respondents (Jul 2020 Aug 2021) reported never having been previously tested for COVID-19 (N=1924).
- Of those surveyed who had been previously tested for COVID-19 (N=1158), 87% reported receiving a negative result and 11% reported receiving a positive result, while 2% received an inconclusive or pending result.

DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Age in Testing Population

- Among the 8446 total completed COVID-19 tests, the age distribution of those tested (the red line in Figure 8 below) closely follows the age distribution of all COVID-19 cases in counties served by NCHC² (Figure 8).
- The greatest incidence of COVID-19 is found among ages 20-44, across all counties (average 37%) and makes up the largest testing population (36%) (Figure 8).
- Since September 2020, the two largest testing age groups have been <20 (avg. 32%) and 20-44 (avg. 34%).

September 2021 Highlights

<20 accounted for 41% of all tests, likely due to increased cases and testing requirements for this age group as schools re-opened.</p>

In Coconino County, <24 accounted for 62% of tests in September. The majority of these tests (80%) were among ≤14, indicating that testing among young people at NCHC Central region is primarily driven by younger children rather than high school or university students.

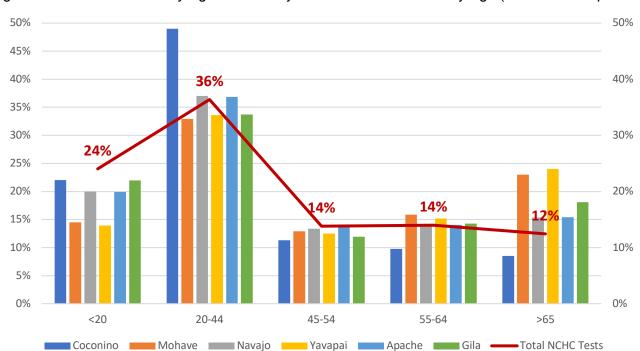


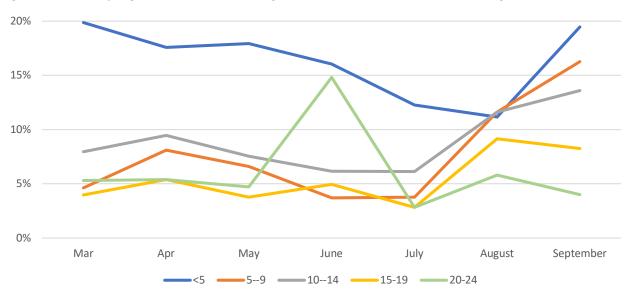
Figure 8. COVID-19 Cases by Age and County with Total NCHC Tests by Age (Mar 2020 - Sept 2021)

Testing Trends among Youth, Ages 0-24

The bulk of testing among 0-24 age group during the previous 6 months has occurred in the Central Region. NCHC partners expressed interest in seeing the distribution of testing among this group in the Central Region, in order to understand how the demand for testing has changed recently with schools re-opening and vaccine eligibility expanding.

- Older youth, ages 15-24 have made up 11% of tests since March and have not increased significantly since the start of the school year. In contrast, testing among ≤14 has steadily increased since July, indicating that testing among young people is currently driven by ages ≤14 (Figure 9).
- The youngest age group (0-5) has consistently made up the largest percentage of tests among young people, averaging 16% of total tests (twice that of any other age group in this category) since March (Figure 9). This testing trend among ages <5 is particularly interesting, given that they generally exhibit the lowest case rates of all youth age groups (Figure 10.)

Figure 9. Tests by Age Group as percentage of total NCHC Tests, Central Region, Mar - Sept 2021



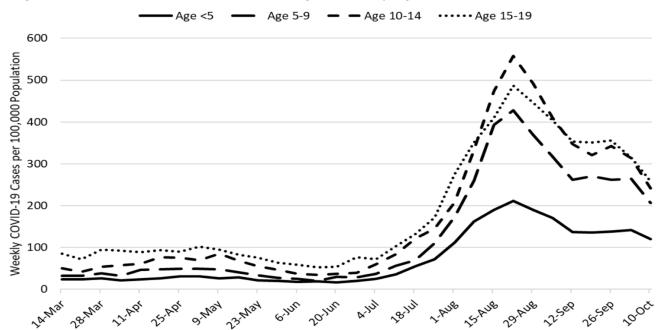


Figure 10. COVID-19 Cases in Arizona among Children by Age Group, March 7 - October 10, 20213

(Figure 10 created by Joe K Gerald, MD, PhD, Assoc Professor, Zuckerman College of Public Health. Borrowed from "Weekly Arizona COVID-19 Data Report, Update October 15, 2021" https://publichealth.arizona.edu/sites/publichealth.arizona.edu/files/cvreports/October-15.pdf)

Age in Surveyed Population

March 2020 through August 2021, the 20-44 age group comprised 36% of the testing population and 35% of completed surveys, both in line with the COVID-19 case distribution for this age group in Northern Arizona counties (avg. 37%) (Figures 11, 12).

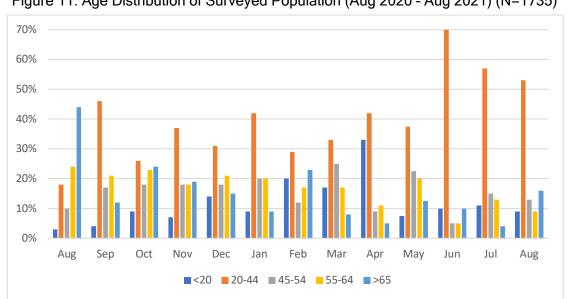


Figure 11. Age Distribution of Surveyed Population (Aug 2020 - Aug 2021) (N=1735)

Age in Surveyed Population vs Total Tested Population

The distribution of age groups shows some **important differences between the total tested population and the subset of surveyed individuals**. Certain groups may be over- or underrepresented in the survey data compared to the total number tested at NCHC (Figure 12).

- In general, the <20 group was consistently surveyed at a lower rate, while the >65 group was surveyed at a higher rate than was represented in the total tested population.
- In particular, the oldest age group was surveyed at a higher rate in July and August 2020 (42% and 45%, respectively) with this discrepancy decreasing over time.
- More recently, in May-August 2021, the <20 age group comprised an average of 9% of the surveyed population, while making up 30% of the testing population.

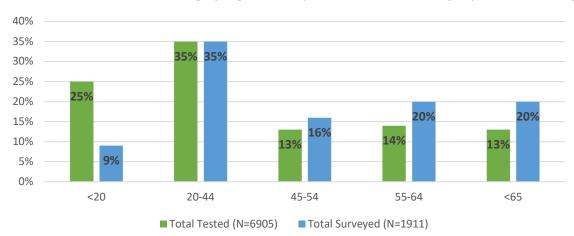


Figure 12. NCHC COVID-19 Testing by Age Group (Total Tested vs Surveyed), Jul 2020 - Aug 2021

Gender & Orientation

- The NCHC testing population is primarily women (57%, N=6514), which is in line with state trends, indicating that 52% of COVID-19 cases occur in females.² This testing trend is consistent across the NCHC regions.
- 88% self-described as heterosexual and 6% of people identified as LGBTQIA (the remaining 6% are "undisclosed") (N=6247).

Race & Ethnicity

- The majority (70%) of those tested self-described as white (N=7339), representing a higher percentage of the testing population than the COVID-19 case distribution in every county in Northern Arizona (average 40%)² (Figure 13).
- 24% of those tested identified as Hispanic / Latino (N=7215), representing a higher proportion of the testing population compared with the case distribution across all counties (average 11%)² (Figure 13).
- 15% identified as Native American / Alaska Native (N=7339), representing a lower percentage of testing population than is reflected in the case distribution in almost every county (average 25%)² (Figure 13).
- Patients identifying as Black or Asian/Pacific Islander account for <2% of COVID-19
 Cases in Northern Arizona counties and ~4% of the NCHC testing population.

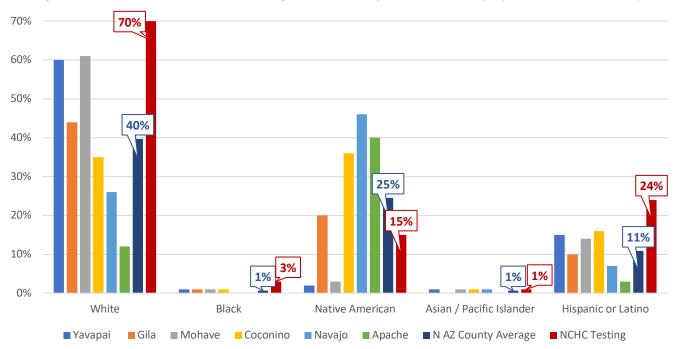


Figure 13. COVID-19 Case and Testing Distribution by Race / Ethnicity* (updated Oct 7, 2021)

^{*}Excluded categories: The "unknown" category that accounted for an average of 20% of cases in ADHS data and 6% of NCHC tests; the "other, non-Hispanic" category used by ADHS for COVID-19 cases (average 5% of cases), that did not have a correlate in the NCHC data; and the NCHC category "two or more races," accounting for 6% of tests, which did not have a correlate in ADHS data.

Payer Categories

- Among all patients tested for COVID-19, the two largest payer categories were AHCCCS (36%) and Commercial insurance (36%) (N=8407) (Figure 14).
- If we assume that those receiving AHCCCS and paying on the sliding scale are lowincome, then we can say that low-income patients represent approximately half (52%) of tested patients.

Commercial 36% **AHCCCS** 36% Medicare 11% Sliding scale 16% Other **1**%

Figure 14. NCHC COVID-19 Testing Payer Categories (N=8407)

Living Situation

- 9% of total survey respondents (N=1932) reported having lived in a group setting in the previous two weeks. This includes those living in a homeless shelter, assisted living facility, dorm, or jail.
- 6% of all tested patients (480/8446) self-described as homeless, representing a higher proportion of the testing population than is reflected in the total population of Northern Arizona, where fewer than 1% identify as homeless.4
- Of these 6% (480) who identified as homeless, about 2/3 reported staying in a homeless shelter and 1/3 in some other homeless situation such as "street, transitional, or other."





Health Status

• The majority of survey respondents (90%) described their general health as good, very good, or excellent; 2% described their general health as "poor" (N=1922).

Flu – Incidence and Vaccination

- The Flu incidence question was eliminated in the revised survey implemented in February 2021.
- Flu Vaccination (revised): 45% of survey respondents reported having received a flu vaccine in the 2020-2021 flu season (N=361). Similarly, 44% of those surveyed in 2020 (N=1589) reported receiving the flu vaccine during the 2019-2020 flu season.

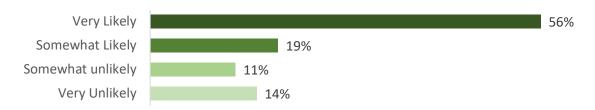
COVID-19 Vaccine Willingness (Question implemented Feb 2021)

Survey participants were asked how likely they were to take an approved COVID-19 vaccine, ranking their answer on a 4-point Likert scale from Very Likely to Very Unlikely. 56% of patients surveyed between February - August 2021 (N=331) reported that they would be "very likely" to receive the vaccine, while 30% reported being "somewhat likely" or "somewhat unlikely" to get vaccinated (Figure 16).

Highlights

A shift in attitudes toward the vaccine can be seen since the initiation of the survey: in February, only 40% of respondents said they were "very likely" to get the vaccine. In August this group made up 63% of survey responses.

Figure 16. Surveyed Patients' Likelihood of Taking the COVID-19 Vaccine (Feb-Aug 2021) (N=331)



COVID-19 Prevention Behaviors

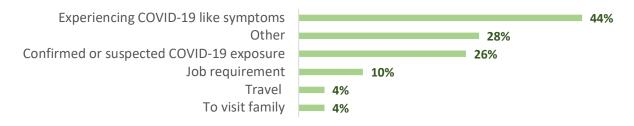
Reasons for Getting a COVID-19 Test (Question implemented February 2021)

Surveyed patients were asked why they were getting a COVID-19 test, choosing from a list of five possible reasons. Overall, the **most common cited reason was** "Experiencing COVID-19 like symptoms" (44%, N=334) (Figure 15). The most common response in the "other" category was to receive medical treatment.

Highlights

The percentage of survey respondents citing "Experiencing COVID-19-like symptoms" nearly doubled from May (32%) to August (61%).

Figure 17. Reported Reasons for Getting a COVID-19 Test* (Feb-Aug 2021) (N=334)



^{*}Total % is greater than 100% as respondents were able to choose more than one reason.

Related Motivations and Exposures

- On average, 22% of all survey respondents reported having been sick within the two weeks prior to getting tested.
- 21% of respondents said they had been exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19 in the previous 14 days.
- 11% reported having a household member who had ever tested positive for COVID-19.

Highlights

Since March 2021, experiencing COVID-19- like symptoms in the two weeks prior to testing has remained the most common survey response related to COVID-19 Risk Factors, averaging 39% (Figure 18).

13% said that a household member currently had COVID-19-like symptoms.

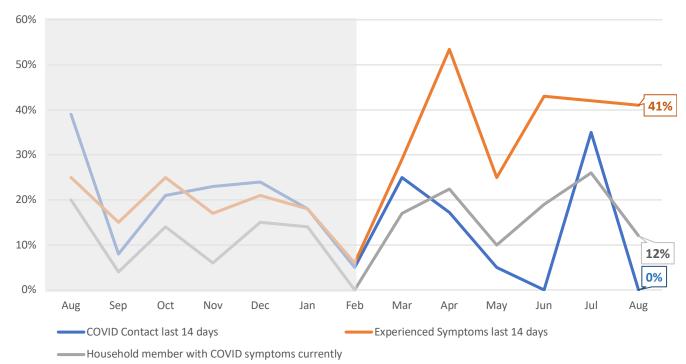


Figure 18. Reported Exposures in Previous 14 Days Motivating Testing (N=1934)

Note: In the previous report, there was an error in Figure 18 for August survey responses to this question. Please note that these are the correct data for August 2021.

Behavior Changes Since Hearing about COVID-19

When asked what behavior changes they had made since hearing about COVID-19, survey respondents were asked to select one or more options from a list of common prevention behaviors (N=1942). In general, the most commonly reported behavior changes were wearing a wearing a mask outside of the home (86%) and washing hands more often (86%).

Highlights

Wearing a mask and washing hands have been the most common and consistently reported prevention behaviors over the entirety of this survey, whereas other reported behaviors have fluctuated significantly (Figure 19).

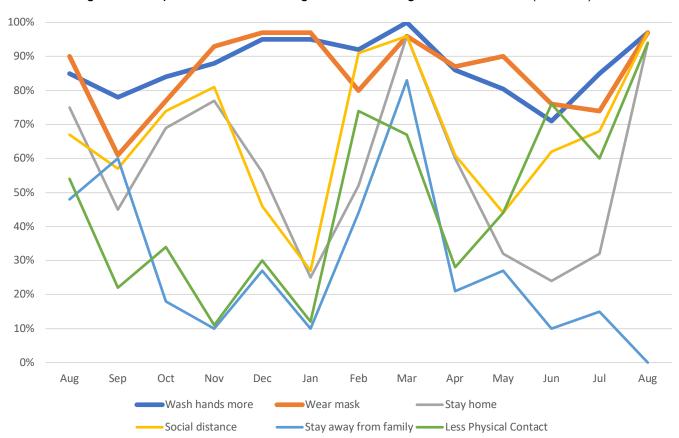


Figure 19. Reported behavior changes since hearing about COVID-19 (N=1880)

EVALUATION TAKE-AWAYS & NEXT STEPS

The NCHC Expanded COVID-19 Testing Program has outlined several goals, which are tracked through this evaluation and outlined below. The next steps identify opportunities to enhance our understanding of these goals moving forward.

Goal 1: Expand Testing Opportunities

NCHC significantly expanded its COVID-19 testing capacity in all regions, completing a total of 8446 tests between March 1, 2020 and September 30, 2021. The recent increase in testing since July 2021 indicates a continued demand for the testing services provided by NCHC.

Goal 2: Enhance Access for Gap and Vulnerable Groups

The NCHC Expanded COVID-19 Testing Program has increased access to testing for many gap and vulnerable populations across Northern Arizona, though there remain opportunities to expand outreach and connect more of these individuals to testing.

- Homeless/Unsheltered: NCHC is achieving its goal of increasing access to testing for this population. 6% of all tested individuals described themselves as homeless, whereas homeless individuals make up less than 1% of the total population in Arizona.
 - Next Steps: Increase efforts to work with agencies in all regions that serve homeless individuals in order to reach more of this population. NCHC has stated a commitment to continue their partnership with Flagstaff Shelter Services.
- Low-income: NCHC is achieving its goal of providing access to low-income individuals.
 Patients receiving AHCCCS or qualifying for sliding scale payment at NCHC represent the greatest proportion of tested patients (52%).
- Racial/Ethnic Minorities: The NCHC COVID-19 Testing Program is primarily utilized by individuals who self-identify as white (70%). Nonetheless, the program is succeeding at reaching Hispanic / Latinos, on average testing a higher percentage of these groups (24%) than is represented in the COVID-19 case distribution for this population in Northern Arizona (11%) and in the general NCHC patient population (17.5% in 2018). Testing for Native Americans averages a lower percentage of the testing population (15%) than is represented in the case distribution (25%), but a higher percentage than is represented in the general NCHC patient population (8.8% in 2019). The testing program has also been successful at reaching patients identifying as Black or

Asian/Pacific Islander, who account for just <2% of COVID-19 Cases in Northern Arizona counties but approximately 4% of the NCHC testing population.

- Next Steps: Understanding that the burden of testing for Native Americans is shared with Indian Health Services, it is important to continue outreach to Native American populations, particularly in Coconino, Gila, Apache and Navajo counties. Because Agency Referral is the most commonly reported way that people learn about testing opportunities at NCHC, we recommend increasing outreach to community agencies that serve Native Americans.
- Elderly: Testing among the >65 age group accounts for 12% of total NCHC COVID-19 tests, while the case distribution among this age group in Northern Arizona is 18%. In Mohave County the >65 age group makes up 23% of COVID-19 cases, but averages around 16% of tests (Nov 2020-Sept 2021).
 - Next Steps: Track the impact of NCHC's new mobile medical unit (MMU) that is partnering with local agencies to expand COVID-19 testing opportunities for older adults in Mohave County.
 - Update May 28, 2021: The MMU started outreach events this month and had some success reaching elderly clients at pop-up events in Mohave County.
- Chronically III: It is unclear how well represented chronically ill individuals are in the testing population; however, since 90% describe their health as good, very good, or excellent, we can assume that those with chronic illnesses or co-morbidities make up 10% or less of the tested population. Across Northern Arizona, the average COVID-19 case distribution for those with a chronic medical condition is 20%.
 - Next Steps: Consider doing more targeted outreach and testing with chronically ill or co-morbid existing NCHC patients.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

*Revised January 2021 / Implemented February 2021

NCHC-COVID Testing Expansion Demographic Appendix

Date of Test:

Patient ID:	In the last 14 days, have you started feeling sick?	
Tation 15.	• Yes	
	o No	
Is there a place that you USUALLY go to when you are sick or	How did you learn about COVID-19 testing at North Country?	
need advice about your health?	o Email	
o No	Social media	
 Clinic or health center 	o Friend	
 Doctor's office or HMO 	County Health Department	
 Hospital emergency room 	o Flyer	
 Hospital outpatient department 	o Invitation	
 Some other place 	o Website	
	○ Employer	
	Agency referral	
Do others living in your household have COVID-19 symptoms?	Have others living in your household tested positive for COVID-	
Yes	19?	
o No	o Yes	
	o No	
If you have been tested for COVID-19 before, what was the	Which changes have you had since hearing about COVID-19?	
result of that test?	Check all that apply.	
 Not previously tested 	 Wash my hands more regularly 	
o Positive	Wear a mask when I go outside my residence	
Negative	 Stay home except for food or medical care 	
o Inconclusive	 Stay 6 feet away from people 	
o Pending	 Not staying with family (quarantining away from 	
If yes, where were you tested?	family)	
 North Country HealthCare 	Less physical contact with others	
 Testing blitz 	Other (Please specify):	
 Health Department 		
 Emergency Department 		
 Indian Health Service 		
o Other:		
In the last 14 days, have you had any contact with someone	How likely are you to get an approved COVID-19 vaccine when	
who tested positive for COVID-19?	it becomes available?	
o No	Very Likely	
o Maybe	o Likely	
o Yes	o Neutral	
Don't Know	Not Likely	
	Very Unlikely	
Would you say your health in general is:	Why are you getting a COVID-19 Test? Check all that apply:	
o Excellent	 Confirmed or suspected COVID-19 exposure 	
Very good	 Job requirement 	
o Good	 To visit family 	
o Fair	o Travel	
o Poor	 Experiencing COVID-19 like symptoms 	
	o Other	
Did you get the flu vaccine this season (August 2020 to now)	In the 14 days before you started feeling ill, did you live in or	
Yes	spend time in a group living setting (e.g., assisted living facility,	
o No	homeless shelter, dorm, jail)?	
I don't remember	○ Yes	
a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a	o No	
	I	

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