Health IT Essential to White House's COVID-19 National Emergency Response

Leveraging diagnostic testing technologies, telehealth and digital services are key to the administration's rapid response to the coronavirus.

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Improved diagnostic testing technology, telehealth, screening website services and other health IT solutions are critical elements to addressing the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak, according to the White House national emergency announcement Friday.
President Donald Trump’s national emergency plan gives new authorities to the Department of Health and Human Services and brings in several major private-sector partners in an aim to rapidly address and ramp up testing and treatment of COVID-19.

The national emergency measures have given the Food and Drug Administration rapid approval authorities for devices and systems that can scale up COVID-19 testing capabilities. FDA just approved the first high-speed COVID-10 test, which Roche Holding produces, on Friday with the new emergency use authority. Normal authorization would take weeks, but waiving typical FDA approval procedures will enable new tests by the beginning of next week, Trump said.

“Using federal emergency authorities, the FDA approved a new test for the virus,” Trump said. “We did this within hours after receiving the application from Roche—a process that would normally take weeks. We therefore expect up to half a million additional tests will be available early next week. We’ll be announcing [testing] locations probably on Sunday night.”

Roche’s system which can process up to 4,000 COVID-19 diagnostic tests per day — allegedly 10 times faster than current capabilities. Testing labs, such as Lab Corps and Quest, will work with these testing systems to push diagnostic results out more rapidly.

“Roche received FDA approval, moving from request to development to approval in record time,” Dr. Deborah Birx, COVID-19 task force member and State Department ambassador. “This innovative approach centered fully on unleashing the power of the private sector, focusing on providing convenient testing to hundreds of thousands of Americans within short turnaround times.”

Individuals seeking COVID-19 testing will not only find them at medical facilities and hospitals, but at “drive thru” testing clinics that state and local authorities will establish at locations such as parking lots at Walmarts.
The president also announced that Google is aiding the administration in launching a website that will serve as a symptom and screening tool to help mediate screening. The website will enable users to match their symptoms to those of COVID-19, and if individuals’ indicate that their conditions match the virus, the website will help individuals identify nearby testing clinics.

Other digital services, such as telehealth, are also critical to the national response to COVID-19. Part of HHS’s newfound authority is in their ability to enable more telehealth abilities.

“The Secretary of HHS will be able to immediately wave provisions of applicable laws and regulations to give doctors, all hospitals and health care providers maximum flexibility to respond to the virus and care for patients,” Trump said. “This includes …critical authorities to waive laws to enable telehealth. ... It gives remote doctor’s visits and hospital check-ins the power to waive certain federal license requirements so that doctors from other states can provide services in states with the greatest need.”

The president gave further authorities, such as the ability to waive requirements that critical-access hospitals limit the number of beds they provide to 25 and length of stay to 96 hours, as well as the ability to waive the requirement of a three-day hospital stay prior to admission to a nursing home.

HHS will also waive rules that hinder hospitals’ abilities to bring additional physicians on board or obtain office space they need, as well as “rules that severely restrict where hospitals can care for patients within the hospital itself, ensuring that the emergency capacity can be quickly established,” the president said.

Other provisions under the national emergency announcement include Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services guidance to temporarily restrict all visitors and non-essential personnel from nursing homes. The president also announced that he will waive all federal student loan interest “until further notice” amid the virus outbreak.