

POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR THE PANDEMIC

POLICY MEMO: ENLISTING
PHARMACISTS TO FIGHT COVID-19
APRIL 1, 2020

The Buckeye Institute's Recommendation

Ohio should enlist its pharmacists to join doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals on the front lines in the battle against COVID-19. The state should permit pharmacists to test for the virus once tests become available, and encourage them to test and prescribe treatments for common illnesses like the flu and strep throat in order to relieve burdens on other health care workers dealing with surges in COVID-19 patients.

Background

Large scale COVID-19 testing remains in the early stages, but once available, adequate testing capacity will be critical for responding quickly and effectively. Successfully ending the COVID-19 crisis will require widespread testing in order to determine an accurate infection rate, track infections, improve treatment strategies, and implement more focused containment and quarantine measures. Pharmacists can aid that effort by administering the COVID-19 test and dramatically increasing the number of trained professionals and easily accessible locations for testing. **An estimated** 90 percent of Americans live within two miles of a pharmacy, making pharmacies critical access points for testing and potential treatment for COVID-19 patients especially in rural areas that likely will face general shortages of health care providers and COVID-19 treatment centers.

The **Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments of 1988** (CLIA) regulates most laboratories that test for human diseases. Some tests, like those for the flu and strep throat, have waivers from CLIA requirements so that they are more widely available at home or local pharmacies. Similar **authorization** for COVID-19 tests could allow pharmacists to alleviate strains on the overall health care system during this pandemic.

Cutting Ohio's regulatory red tape and allowing pharmacists to test and treat the flu, strep throat, and other common illnesses will relieve pressure elsewhere in the health care system by shifting the initial point of care for these common ailments away from the doctors and hospitals currently grappling with COVID-19. **Florida** is the most recent of **many states** to let pharmacists test and prescribe medication for illnesses like strep throat and influenza. Ohio should follow suit. It also should authorize pharmacists to prescribe any future COVID-19 vaccines or medications and thereby preempt anticipated surges of COVID-19 patients in hospitals and doctors' offices.

Conclusion

Pharmacies can play a vital role in Ohio's response to COVID-19. Ohio should enlist its pharmacists in this pandemic fight and authorize them to test for COVID-19. Other states already allow pharmacists to test and prescribe for common illnesses, and Ohio should too. Making full use of pharmacists now and in the future will relieve the burdens on doctors and hospitals, and increase access to health care in Ohio's rural communities.