

Sam Houston State, Texas State University to hire tracers as experts warn of a fall COVID-19 surge

Sam Houston State University and the Texas State University System are aiming to hire approximately 200 COVID-19 contact tracers statewide ahead of an expected resurgence of the novel coronavirus this fall.

As colleges and universities emerge as potential hot spots for the virus, SHSU hopes to recruit students and those in surrounding communities for part-time, remote positions to track COVID-19 cases across Texas.

Chad Hargrave, associate vice president of SHSU's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, said the university system joined with state health officials to recruit a large workforce and leverage the system's geographic reach.

CONTACT TRACING VITAL

Experts say contact tracing — the often arduous process of cataloging an infected patient's every move to determine who else may have been exposed to the virus — is vital to mitigating spread and safely reopening businesses.

Gov. Greg Abbott in April set a goal of employing 4,000 contact tracers by June 1 as part of his phased reopening plan. But the state has consistently struggled to meet that mark. That month, the DSHS shrunk its contact tracing workforce even as cases of COVID-19 surged, hospitals in some parts of the state neared capacity and Abbott ordered bars to again close.

Local health departments described a frenzied effort to hire enough contact tracers to meet the need. But long lines and slow turnaround for COVID-19 tests — which sometimes took weeks to get results — meant an infected person could potentially expose more people before contact tracers could begin their work.

Abbott's goal fell far short of estimates by outside

groups that analyzed Texas' needs. In late April, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials estimated that Texas would need almost 9,000 contact tracers. A George Washington University model puts that number at more than 30,000, based on the number of cases in the past 14 days.

Texas currently has more than 3,500 contact tracers, according to DSHS spokesperson Chris Van Deusen. The state partnered with the Texas State University System to "provide additional flexibility as the pandemic continues," he said.

"As it stands, there are enough contact tracers in the call center to handle the current workload," Van Deusen said.

Key metrics, including the share of positive COVID-19 tests and new hospitalizations, have for weeks trended downward from their summertime peak. The state reported a seven-day positivity rate — or the proportion of positive tests — of 5.94% as of Sunday, down from more than 20% at its highest.

Earlier this month, Abbott loosened restrictions for retail stores and restaurants, which can now operate at up to 75% capacity, and allowed hospitals to resume elective surgeries.

Continued testing and contact tracing efforts are necessary to monitor and contain the virus' spread, experts say.

PREPARING FOR SURGE

Health officials, meanwhile, are preparing for another potential surge this fall. Cases in some states have already begun to rise as students return to schools, governments relax restrictions and people take fewer precautions. They warn that an active flu season poses

a further threat to a strained health care system.

"We could have a resurgence — a third peak — that's potentially worse than the one we just went through," Dr. Peter Hotez, dean at the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, said during an interview at the 2020 Texas Tribune Festival.

BLEAK FORECAST

Robert Redfield, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, previously issued a bleak forecast for the fall and winter, warning that the coming months could be "one of the most difficult times that we experienced in American public health."

Airline workers prepare for layoffs

The worries are growing for United Airlines flight attendant Jordy Comeaux. In a few days, he'll be among roughly 40,000 airline workers whose jobs are likely to evaporate in an industry decimated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Unless Congress acts to help for a second time, United will furlough Comeaux on Thursday, cutting off his income and health insurance. Unemployment and the money made by his husband, a home health nurse, won't be enough to pay the bills including rent near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

"I don't have enough, unfortunately, to get by," said Comeaux, 31, who has worked for United for four years. "No one knows what's going to come next and how to prepare."

Since the pandemic hit, thousands of flight attendants, baggage handlers, gate agents and others have been getting at least partial pay through \$25 billion in grants and loans to the nation's airlines. To receive the aid, companies agreed not to lay off employees through Sept. 30. That "Payroll Support Program" helped many stay on, and keep health care and other benefits.

It all runs out on Thursday.

With air travel down about 70% from last year, many carriers including United and American say they'll be forced to cut jobs without additional aid. Delta and Southwest, two other big carriers, tapped private capital markets and say they'll avoid layoffs.

Industry analysts say fear of air travel and businesses keeping employees close to home have brought an unprecedented crisis to the industry, resulting in cataclysmic losses.



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