

Experts: Here's how many more contact tracers U.S. needs

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What's the news: Contact tracing—a key piece to getting the pandemic under control and aiding economic recovery—needs more funding to properly operate, the AMA and five other national organizations told congressional leaders in a recent letter.

The AMA and other signatories acknowledge \$25 billion in the CARES Act to help states scale up their contact tracing capacity, but told House and Senate leaders that state officials and budget officers nationwide worry that money from that pot is not enough for states to continue ramping up contact tracing, especially as state budgets have been decimated this year.

States and localities had about 2,200 contact tracers before COVID-19, the letter says, and there are plans to scale up to about 66,000 contact tracers. But, the AMA and others tell House and Senate leaders that at least 100,000 or more contact tracers are needed “to meaningfully control transmission of the virus as states continue to lift social distancing restrictions.”

And that can't happen, the letter explains, unless there is ample testing and robust funding to meet the workforce goal and support contract-tracing efforts throughout the pandemic.

The letter notes that Florida has only about 10% of the contract tracers required and that a health district in Connecticut has received just \$40,000 in federal aid that officials there were told would need to last until March 2021.

“If we want to get back to our full economic potential and create prosperity now and into the future, we ask that you act quickly to give states the substantial tools and resources they need to both track the virus and give the public the confidence to participate fully in all the activities which make living in America great,” the letter says.

Joining the AMA as signatories are:

- American College of Physicians.
- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Health Security.
- Pacific Business Group on Health, a member organization of private employers and public agencies that tests innovative health care methods and look to make improvements in U.S. health care.
- Service Year Alliance, which builds people's workforce skills and connects them to help with things such as disaster response and community development.
- United States of Care, a movement to ensure every American can access quality and affordable health care.

COVID-19 contact tracing, isolation are key. Learn with the AMA how to do them ethically.

Why it's important: While expanding accurate and reliable testing is part of a comprehensive approach to infection control, contact tracing is equally important to control the virus. Without adequate contact tracing, public health and medical experts cannot identify those who may have been exposed to COVID-19 and have those citizens quarantine if necessary. The result of that lapse, the letter says, has led to the surges that the nation was trying to prevent.

"Whether through shoe leather, technology or both, this tried and true public health strategy is inextricably linked to our ability to keep our economy open with employee and consumer confidence," the letter tells Congressional leaders.

A recent poll by market research firm Ipsos shows that Americans are warming to the idea of contact tracing, with 76% of respondents telling pollsters that they would give officials a list of everyone they had come into contact with. And a Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) June poll found that Americans concern around the pandemic remains high and that Americans want public health, medical experts and data to inform the national response to the pandemic.

"Our own organizations take seriously the responsibility to keep our communities and the nation safe, which is why we consider state contact tracing an investment in people, the economy and the long-term future of our country," the letter says.

Find out what physicians can do to boost COVID-19 contact-tracing efforts.

Learn more: Stay up to speed on the AMA's COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track the fast-moving pandemic with the AMA's COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of the most up-to-date resources from JAMA Network™, the CDC, and the World Health Organization.

Find out how, in the COVID-19 crisis, the AMA's powerful voice has rung out to save lives.