

COVID-19 testing ‘disaster’ leaves trail of frustration in city’s hard-hit northwest corner

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A new satellite COVID-19 testing site that was intended to increase access for those who need it most is deepening frustrations in Toronto’s hard-hit northwest corner, amid a “testing mess” that has left more than 125 patients waiting — in some cases for over two weeks — for results.

York South-Weston MPP Faisal Hassan, who fought for months to bring the assessment centre to Humber River Hospital’s Church Street site, said the testing delays are a “disaster” in a community with disproportionately high COVID rates, where many residents are front-line workers unable to work from home.

“This is a complete failure of the government’s leadership here in our community,” Hassan said. “They have been far too slow to address the COVID crisis in our community. Once again, we are being neglected. We are putting more lives at risk.”

The province told the Star the problem that led to testing delays at the Church Street location has been fixed and that all impacted results are “now available.” However, some people say they are still waiting. Their experience raises questions about apparent inequities in the testing system and the lack of recourse Ontarians have to find out their results when things go wrong.



On Tuesday, in response to questions from Hassan in the legislature about the testing delays at the Church Street site, Health Minister Christine Elliott committed to making testing more accessible.

“If there is a need — and it sounds as if there is in your community — that is probably an area where we should be opening up more, either pop-up assessments or more testing in pharmacies,” she said. “We’ll do whatever we can to get the resources there.”

A spokesperson from Ontario Health told the Star that eight days from Sept. 28, when the Church Street site first opened, to Oct. 7, are “under review,” after a “routing issue” led to lengthy delays in posting 128 results from the satellite location to the province’s public portal. (The assessment centre was closed on Oct. 4 and 5.)

The spokesperson said the results were sent to Humber’s main assessment centre instead of the satellite location, which caused the delay.

Ontario Health learned of the problem on Oct. 15 “through the provincial COVID-19 lab network,” the spokesperson said.

“No other locations were affected by (the) routing issue. Partners, including members of the provincial COVID-19 lab network and assessment centres, have met to ensure this issue won’t happen again,” the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson said “all results were posted to the public portal” on Oct. 16, and that “Humber River Hospital has been calling the affected patients and monitoring all results provided to them.”

A spokesperson for Humber River, Joe Gorman, said the routing issue was, in fact, resolved on Oct. 6.

Neither Ontario Health nor Humber River responded to questions about whether any delayed results were positive.

Kelly Iggers, an elementary teacher in Toronto, is still waiting for results 18 days after getting tested at the Church Street site on Oct. 2.

Iggers, who had been feeling fatigued and unwell, checked the online portal multiple times a day. After three days, and hearing from others about delayed results at the Church Street site, she drove downtown, to Mount Sinai Hospital, for another COVID test.

Her negative results from that test were posted to the province's online portal within 24 hours. By then, she was feeling better, and anxious to return to school.

Iggers, who spearheads Ontario SAFE, a volunteer group advocating for safe and equitable conditions in the province's schools, said she had "concerns about double-dipping and doing two tests when we have this overburdened system." But if she had waited for her results from Humber River, she would still be out of school — "a cost on the education system and my colleagues not having prep cover for their students."

Aware that not everyone has the means and ability to access a second test at a hospital with quick turnaround times, Iggers said the failure at Humber River highlights the inequities COVID reveals in Toronto.

"We're seeing, in yet another way, that our system is failing racialized and marginalized people in our city in a way that it is not failing those in many other communities," she said, noting delays of this magnitude could lead to more serious and continued community spread of the virus.

On Tuesday, Hassan told the Star his office continues to get calls from constituents who say they were tested at the Church Street site in late September and early October, and are still waiting for results.

"It's forcing my community to stay in isolation and unable to earn a living, and risks making community transmission even worse," he said, noting his riding was flagged months ago as a COVID "hot spot."

Toronto Public Health data released this week confirms earlier reporting by the Star that showed alarmingly high test-positivity rates in some pockets in the northwest corner — which includes York South-Weston and Premier Doug Ford's Etobicoke North riding. The data showed the rate of testing is lagging in many of these same neighbourhoods.

In a response to the Star, Ontario Health said results will not appear on the public portal for people "who don't have health cards, whose health cards have expired, or whose health card number was incorrectly inputted." Instead, those people will be contacted by phone, the agency said.

As of Oct. 20, Iggers said she had not received a phone call regarding her Church Street test results and that her health card is valid and was scanned by the nurse at the assessment centre. As well, her results appeared without issue after her test at Mount Sinai, she said.

Humber River Hospital did not respond to questions about Iggers's case.

In an email Tuesday, hospital spokesperson Gorman said now that the issue is resolved, “results have been appearing on the provincial portal within 48-72 hours, which aligns with provincial expectations.”

He said the hospital “continues to call all patients” who test positive for COVID and all patients tested at Humber River’s assessment centres receive “a phone number of the assessment centre staff, should they need further support.”

Michael Zloczewski, a teacher in Peel, spent more than two weeks waiting for results after being tested at the Church Street site on Oct. 1. He called the hospital repeatedly.

“The extension I was given would ring and ring and ring, or I would hear: ‘I’m sorry we are working on it. I’m sorry we’re looking into it,’” said Zloczewski, who went for testing on the direction of Peel Public Health after being exposed to someone with COVID.

Though he had no symptoms, Zloczewski followed public health advice and isolated at home while waiting for his results until a public health worker cleared him to return to work on Oct. 15 — two weeks after his COVID-19 exposure.

Seventeen days after getting swabbed, Zloczewski found his negative results on the online portal. While relieved, Zloczewski said the incident has left him worried about how many people faced similar delays.

“I’m fortunate,” he said. “But I put myself in the situation of some of my students’ parents for whom English isn’t their first language or they may be in a socioeconomic situation where they can’t take extended time off work.”

Minister Elliott told reporters at Queen’s Park Tuesday she “couldn’t answer to that specific situation” at the Church Street site.

Hassan is not satisfied. He is calling for more accountability from the province “to get to the bottom” of what went wrong.

“We need urgent action to fix the testing mess ... to protect our community before it’s too late,” he said.

With files from Robert Benzie

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