

# *In Virus Hot Spot, Lining Up and Anxious at Drive-in Test Center*

In New Rochelle, the early epicenter of the coronavirus in New York, the state's first drive-in facility serves those at risk or with symptoms.



A section of a park on Long Island Sound in New Rochelle, N.Y., has been converted into a drive-through testing center for the coronavirus. Credit...Andrew Seng for The New York Times



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Published March 17, 2020   Updated March 19, 2020

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. — Any other place, any other time, the three white tents set against the Long Island Sound in the middle of a public park, with a line of vehicles waiting to get in, could have easily been the scene of a wedding or a garden party.

But the appearance of the people underneath the tents — in silver hazmat suits, face shields and masks — told a different story.

It is the state's first drive-through [coronavirus](#) testing center, set in the middle of Glen Island, a 105-acre park connected by drawbridge to the mainland in New Rochelle, an epicenter of the outbreak when coronavirus first emerged in the state earlier this month.

New York is among roughly 10 states that have set up their own drive-through testing centers, as state and local leaders look to compensate for an acute shortage of tests in the United States.

That shortage has set back the country's efforts to respond to the pandemic, concealing the spread of the virus as unidentified cases multiply.

In the United States, only about 25,000 people [had been tested](#) as of March 11, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. South Korea has been able to test at least 10,000 people a day, for a total of 274,000 people so far, even though the two countries discovered their first cases around the same time.

Part of South Korea's aggressive approach to testing includes drive-through facilities, and New York officials said they used South Korea's efforts as a model for the center in New Rochelle, a Westchester County suburb five miles north of New York City's border.

Since it opened on March 13, cars have snaked across the drawbridge here, filled with anxious people waiting to find out if they have the virus.

The cars pulled underneath the white tents where medical personnel in full-body hazmat suits, with yellow tape around their wrists and ankles to seal off any gaps, were waiting. Then the drivers were asked to roll down their window, tip their head back and submit to a series of nasal and throat swabs.

"We have to be careful, one mistake could be a big problem," Lisa Baez-Alessandro, a nurse from Staten Island said, wearing a silver Tyvek suit inside the tent's "hot zone," where the swab tests are performed.

"But this is why we became nurses," she said. "This is the time to help. If we don't do this, what are we doing?"

In its first four days of operation, the drive-through center tested 1,882 people in New Rochelle, in which a one-mile radius [was declared a containment area by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo last week](#).

The numbers of those tested who were found to be infected are not yet available.

The declaration became necessary after a lawyer who lives in New Rochelle and works in Manhattan attended public gatherings, including at least one at his synagogue, Young Israel of New Rochelle, before he knew he had the coronavirus.

The testing center in New Rochelle is a model for facilities being rolled out across the state; a second, in Jones Beach State Park in Nassau County, opens Tuesday, with centers to follow in Suffolk and Rockland Counties as well as Staten Island in New York City.

Federal officials are planning to open more, as well as to enable 2,000 commercial labs to use high-speed machines that can process multiple samples at the same time.

"That we are surprised in March and still scrambling to get testing in place and getting a health care system in place is inexcusable," Governor Cuomo said on Monday.

The governor said the state's drive-through centers, as well as state-run laboratories that have been authorized to conduct tests, are part of [New York's efforts](#) to supplement the federal response.

Since the state began testing on Feb. 29, over 10,000 people have been tested statewide. To qualify for a drive-through or other test in New York State, patients must have qualifying symptoms or be in high-risk pools, like people who are older or those with pre-existing conditions.

They must then get a referral from a doctor to the State Health Department, which issues an appointment. But officials said that people without appointments were not being turned away.

The state is working on streamlining the process: Soon, patients will be able to call a [hotline](#), where they can explain their symptoms. They will receive a call back with an appointment if they are eligible for testing.

As cars pulled up to the small island on Monday, police stationed at the drawbridge called out over megaphones to remind drivers to keep their windows closed. Visitors remain in their cars as they pull through the testing tents and through a series of steps. Around the tents stood uniformed members of the state's National Guard, which had arrived as part of the governor's containment zone efforts.

"They talk about reinventing the wheel, this is the wheel inventing right here," said Major Patrick Cordova, a Guard spokesman. "Next time this happens, they are going to ask: 'What did they do in New Rochelle?'"

At the opening of the tents, health care workers in protective aprons — employees from Northwell Health as well as staff from state and county health departments — approached each vehicle.

They instructed the occupants to place their identification cards on the dashboard, peering through the windshield and tapping the information into tablets they carried.

Next, the staff waved each car forward to the middle of the tent, known as the hot zone, to get tested by medical personnel.

Finally, as vehicles pulled out of the tent, those tested were given a confirmation number. The samples are sent to [BioReference Laboratories](#) in northern New Jersey, and patients would get results in two to three days.

Teams of volunteers from across the state's agencies had spent a week or so setting up the center, a process that needed to account for the state's immediate needs and future goals.

"It was basically building the airplane while you were flying it," said Geza Hrazdina, an administrator in the state's Office of Health Insurance Programs, who had spent six days helping construct and run the drive-through.

"When we built the protocols, we were doing it from two perspectives: One was how can we provide something that was efficient and effective in distributing and conducting testing for the community," Mr. Hrazdina said. The second was creating a model that he said could "be replicated across the state or across the nation."

At the drive-through's third and final stop, where patients get a confirmation number, one volunteer, her mouth covered by a N95 mask, stood at the exit and waved each car goodbye. She held up a handwritten sign.

"Feel better," it said.