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Public Health Tests Nearly 1,300 COVID-19 Samples in Record Week

A rural public health lab, which only a year ago processed between 100 and 150 tests annually for communicable diseases such as measles, mumps and flu, is now processing nearly 10 times that in a week to respond to the widest reaching virus in a century.

The Humboldt County Public Health Laboratory, located in the heart of Eureka, recently processed 1,280 COVID-19 tests in one week thanks to a new process and the early delivery of a new piece of equipment that automates the extraction of RNA and DNA — the genetic materials that allow a microbiologist to determine whether a patient sample contains markers for the COVID-19 virus.

“We would have been much more limited in capacity if not for the early arrival of the KingFisher Flex,” said Public Health Lab Manager Jeremy Corrigan, while suited up in protective lab gear in the only Bioterrorism Lab in the region. “But that piece of equipment is only one part of a labor-intensive process that includes hours before and after the automated extraction process we’re talking about.”

The KingFisher Flex by ThermoFisher Scientific is a piece of high-end lab equipment that uses magnetic particle separation technology allowing for higher volume sample testing. It cost nearly \$75,000 with associated supplies and was paid for with funding from the California Department of Public Health Community Surveillance Grant and federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

“The COVID testing process is complicated and requires multiple steps to get a result from the swab,” said Corrigan, adding that processing takes between 48 and 72 hours. “The KingFisher Flex automates one of the steps of the COVID testing process and allows for higher throughput testing. As testing demand increases, the more automation we have for each step of the process, the more successful we will be in reaching these unprecedented numbers.”

The KingFisher can prepare up to 94 samples in 23 minutes compared to the 13 samples in 45 minutes the lab’s previous extractor could process, Corrigan said. Expediting this extraction phase allows for more samples to be tested in a shorter time period. But the recent high-volume output isn’t due to the KingFisher alone; a new testing method has also been introduced, which makes the difference.

That testing method, formally titled TaqPath COVID-19 Combo Kit, is a fast diagnostic solution that contains the fluids and controls needed for real-time detection of RNA from the COVID-19 virus.

“We’ve changed our whole system. We have a new test and the KingFisher,” Corrigan said. “It’s a huge, huge increase for our tiny lab and I couldn’t be more proud of the team working diligently to pump out results and keep our community informed of their health in a timely manner.”

For the most recent COVID-19 information, visit [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) or [cdph.ca.gov](https://www.cdph.ca.gov). Local information is available at [humboldt.gov](https://www.humboldt.gov) or during business hours by contacting covidinfo@co.humboldt.ca.us or calling 707-441-5000.

Humboldt County COVID-19 Data Dashboard: [humboldt.gov/dashboard](https://www.humboldt.gov/dashboard),
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Humboldt County Lab Manager Jeremy Corrigan displays the reagents needed to amplify COVID-19 RNA in a test sample.



Humboldt County Public Health Microbiologist Annayal Yikum prepares patient samples for the COVID-19 testing process.