

Cruz pitches testing for 'herd immunity'

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Sen. Ted Cruz wants serology tests distributed to look for coronavirus antibodies.

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz wants the federal government to start distributing blood tests to find who has already been infected with the coronavirus — potentially without knowing it — and identify parts of the country heading toward herd immunity so people can return to work as soon as possible.

The Texas Republican is urging Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar to tap into the Strategic National Stockpile and start distributing serology tests to look for the presence of coronavirus antibodies.

Positive test results may mean the patient contracted coronavirus and is recovering or has recovered. Those patients could donate blood to help find treatments for COVID-19, and the tests could help find parts of the

country where swaths of the population are developing immunity to the disease, Cruz wrote in a letter to Azar this week.

“Without a sufficient level of serological tests, we cannot understand the full scope of the coronavirus pandemic, and we cannot identify if and when parts of the country approach herd immunity,” Cruz wrote. “America’s recovery from this virus depends on citizens eventually returning to work — once it is safe. Serological testing is a critical way to quickly and accurately assess coronavirus risk.”

Cruz said the U.S. should begin purchasing the tests, as well, to “encourage needed mass production” now. The United Kingdom recently ordered 3.5 million serological tests, Cruz wrote, noting the U.K. is one fifth the size of the U.S.

“A purchase along this magnitude would encourage mass production by sending a clear signal to commercial manufacturers and laboratories that there is strong and growing demand for these tests,” he wrote. “Moreover, it would help stabilize the supply chain against hoarding and price-gouging.”

A recent University of Texas at Austin study found that COVID-19 is largely spreading undetected, because a large number of cases are asymptomatic and there is still limited laboratory testing capacity. The study estimated that only one in 10 cases are actually tested and reported.

Cruz’s push for serological tests comes as several Houston Democratic members of Congress have pressed the Trump administration for more coronavirus testing, writing that the current availability of tests in Houston and Harris County is “woefully inadequate.”

Even with FEMA-procured kits and supplies, Harris County can only conduct 1,000 tests each day, U.S. Reps. Lizzie Fletcher, Sylvia Garcia and Al Green wrote in a letter last week to Azar and FEMA Administrator Peter Gaynor.

“The lack of testing means that the number of infected individuals is certainly being underestimated and those people could be unknowingly transmitting the virus to others,” they wrote.

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