

Coronavirus positive? Thousands in Germany left wondering

August 13 2020, by David Rising



Parents wait with children on the schoolyard for the start of their first day at a school in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020. Students in North Rhine-Westphalia will have to wear face masks at all times due to the coronavirus pandemic as they return to school this Wednesday. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner)

Tens of thousands of travelers who were tested for the coronavirus upon entering Germany in the last two weeks waited Thursday to learn

whether they were infected as Bavaria state officials acknowledged that many recipients had yet to be notified, including hundreds with positive results.

Bavarian Gov. Markus Soeder postponed his own vacation to the North Sea coast to deal with the holdup, which came as Germany reported its highest number of new virus cases since May 1.

The state Health Ministry said there had been delays in releasing 44,000 test results to people who were checked on their way into Germany, primarily at highway rest stops, including 908 who had tested positive for COVID-19.

"The breakdown that occurred is very irritating and regrettable," Soeder told reporters.

The governor said state Health Minister Melanie Huml offered her resignation, but that he did not accept it and Humi still had his confidence.

"It was a failure in the implementation, but not in the strategy," Soeder said.

Huml said that government employees and staff members from a private company had worked through the night on processing the results and were making calls to all the people who had tested positive.

She could not say how many had been reached, nor where all the people with pending results lived, saying that many of those tested had provided cellphone numbers so their locations were unknown.



- A medical staff takes a sample for a voluntary coronavirus disease test (COVID-19) at the new corona test station at the 'Hochfeltn' service station on the A8 motorway between Salzburg and Munich near Bergen, Germany, Thursday, July 30, 2020. German authorities worked through the night to clear a backlog of coronavirus tests from travelers after it emerged 900 people who were positive for COVID-19 had yet to be informed. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader file)

"This is an ongoing process," she said.

Bavaria has offered free voluntary tests at airports, as well as specific train stations and highway rest areas, and has carried out some 85,000 since the end of July, Huml said.

The interest was higher than expected, and the delays were almost exclusively at the rest areas and train stations where some 60,000 people were tested since July 30, officials said.

Volunteer organizations initially ran the traveler testing program, and workers manually entered tested people's contact details into computer spreadsheets.

The Bavarian Red Cross, one of the groups involved, said they had been given one day to set up five test stations and the Health Ministry provided no software, so the groups had to rely on what they had.

Managing Director Wolfgang Obermair said it was "regrettable" that his and other aid organizations were being painted in a negative light.



Melanie Huml, Health Minister of the German state of Bavaria, left, and Bavaria's governor Markus Soeder, right, address the media during a joint press conference in Munich, Germany, Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020. (Peter Kneffel/dpa via AP)

The stations are all now being taken over by private companies, which Obermair said had worked on streamlining the process in the past two weeks.

Soeder, who has national political aspirations, has been widely criticized for the failure to ensure people were promptly informed of the test

results.

"Anyone who constantly portrays himself as a crisis manager as governor and regularly pats himself on the back is also responsible for ensuring that everything works," Annalena Baerbock, co-leader of the Greens, told German news agency dpa.

Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn defended Soeder, telling public broadcaster ZDF that the delay in communicating the results of 44,000 tests was "annoying, without a doubt" but that Bavaria was heading in the right direction.

"Basically, I'm very grateful that we are testing so extensively and that Bavaria also makes it possible to take tests at rest stops when entering the country by car," Spahn said. "But then, of course, the results have to be transmitted."



- Coronavirus disease tests (COVID-19) lie in a box at the new corona test station at the 'Hochfeln' service station on the A8 motorway between Salzburg and Munich near Bergen, Germany, Thursday, July 30, 2020. German authorities worked through the night to clear a backlog of coronavirus tests from travelers after it emerged 900 people who were positive for COVID-19 had yet to be informed. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader file)

Soeder noted that Bavaria was the only state offering the roadside tests and said the high number of infections detected underscored that the overall strategy of "test, test, test" was a good one.

"We were the pioneers, but naturally mistakes were made, and these mistakes are very regrettable," he said.

Germany has widely been seen as a success story in managing to quickly slow the spread of the pandemic, from a peak of more than 6,000 new cases daily in late March and early April to the low hundreds.

The numbers have been rising recently, however, with the country's disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, reporting 1,445 new confirmed cases Thursday.

The daily count of new cases in Germany has topped 1,000 several times recently. The German health minister said Wednesday that small and mid-sized outbreaks have occurred in almost all regions, largely driven by travelers returning from abroad, people partying and family gatherings.



Protective masks in cotton sewn displayed for sale in front of a tailor shop in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020. In public transport, shops and public buildings at the German capital, it is essential to wear a face mask to protect against the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



Melanie Huml, Health Minister of the German state of Bavaria, left, and Bavaria's governor Markus Soeder, right, arrive for a joint press conference in Munich, Germany, Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020. (Peter Kneffel/dpa via AP)



Melanie Huml, Health Minister of the German state of Bavaria, left, and Bavaria's governor Markus Soeder, right, arrive for a joint press conference in Munich, Germany, Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020. (Peter Kneffel/dpa via AP)

As of Saturday, any travelers arriving anywhere in Germany from high-risk areas were required to take coronavirus tests.

Karl Lauterbach, an epidemiologist and lawmaker for the center-left Social Democrats, said the new figures were worrying.

"The rising number of infections is clearly the start of a second wave," Lauterbach told German broadcaster n-tv.

He called for test procedures to be changed, saying local health

authorities have reached their limits and the focus should be on so-called 'super-spreaders' who make up 10-20% of those infected but are responsible for 80% of transmissions.

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