DC debuts smartphone-based COVID-19 exposure alert system

October 21 2020, by Ashraf Khalil

District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser speaks during a press briefing Monday, Sept. 14, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

The nation's capital has become one of the first jurisdictions in the country to employ a new COVID-19 notification system, a joint Google-

Apple venture that delivers alerts to people's phones, notifying them that they may have been exposed to the coronavirus.

Mayor Muriel Bowser on Tuesday urged all residents with Apple or Android smartphones to opt in to the new DC COVID Alert Notice system, or DC CAN. Bowser called it "a quick and easy way to know if you might have been exposed to COVID-19. Opting in is one more way you can protect yourself, your friends and family, and our entire community."

The new Exposure Notification Express model is a major tweak to existing Google-Apple contact tracing software that became available earlier this year. But that tool was not readily embraced by [health departments](link) around the country, partially because it required jurisdictions to build and maintain their own apps. The new system claims to be simpler and doesn't require iPhone users to download an app—although Android users will still have to do so.

Washington, D.C., and the neighboring states of Maryland and Virginia are the first to embrace the ENE notification system. Those who opt in to the program will receive a push notification on their phone if they have been exposed to a positive COVID-19 case. The D.C. Department of Health defines exposure as being within 6 feet (1.8 meters) of an infected person for more than 15 minutes.

The city statement attempts to address [privacy concerns](link) by emphasizing that it will not track users' locations or see their identities. It explains that each person will be assigned a random ID, which will change every 10 to 20 minutes "to help ensure these random IDs can't be used to identify you or your location."

Each person's phone then "periodically checks all the random IDs associated with positive COVID-19 cases against its own list," the

statement says. "If there's a match, you will receive a COVID-19 exposure notification, with further instructions from D.C. Health on how to keep you and the people around you safe."

Health Department spokesperson Kimberly Henderson said the DC CAN system will also interact with other COVID-19 tracking apps in Delaware, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Pennsylvania and Wyoming.

"Users that travel between these regions will receive Exposure Notifications if they come in close contact with another user that has verified a positive test result regardless of the State experience they are using," Henderson said in an email.

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