

**NEWS**

# Stark County libraries adjust to increased demand for take-home COVID-19 test kits

**Kelli Weir** The Repository

Published 5:26 a.m. ET Jan. 10, 2022

The phones haven't stopped ringing at public libraries throughout Stark County.

Callers, some desperate, want to know whether the library has any take-home COVID-19 test kits available — and, if so, how they can get one.

**More on COVID-19 testing in Stark:** Canton is getting a mass COVID-19 testing site

Stark County District Library employees earlier this month fielded 649 calls in a single day from people asking about the free test kits. The Massillon Public Library has received so many calls lately that its staff genealogist has put aside her own work to answer patron calls about the kits.

The uptick in calls and demand for the kits — fueled by the pervasiveness of the delta and omicron variants — has put additional stress on libraries throughout Ohio, some of which already have been strained by pandemic-related staffing issues.

"We're happy to fill a community need. It's a great community service. ... But it is more of a burden on staff than what we're used to because it's a totally new service," Louisville Public Library Director Brock Hutchison said.

**More:** Megan Del Corso gives insider's look at Stark Library

To put the recent demand in perspective, Ohio public libraries distributed 338,694 testing kits between March and September. They distributed more than 645,000 tests in December alone, according to the Ohio Library Council. Libraries statewide have given out more than 2.24 million tests since March 2021.

Louisville Public Library last week exhausted its supply of nearly 1,000 test kits within three hours and the North Canton Public Library distributed its shipment of 870 test kits in four hours.

The take-home tests, supplied by the Ohio Department of Health, are free to anyone, not just library cardholders. They are the Abbott Lab's 15-minute BinaxNOW COVID-19 tests, which are accepted for those who need a negative test before returning to work. These rapid antigen test kits require users to be able to connect online with a test proctor who will walk them through the testing process. The proctor then sends the test results to an app that must be installed before the session. The tests cannot be administered at the libraries and library staff cannot help with questions about the tests themselves.

How many tests are available per person varies by library. The Louisville Public Library will give up to four kits per household, while the North Canton Public Library has set a limit of two kits per person.

To see a list of places, including non-library locations, that offer the free take-home tests, visit: <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid19/dashboards/other-resources/testing-ch-centers>.

## **Library director: 'Heading down a concerning path'**

Some libraries are tackling the added work with fewer employees.

Statewide, some library systems can't fill their open positions. For example, the Columbus Metropolitan Library is seeking to fill as many as 160 full-time positions to reach its full staffing of 870, a library spokesman said. The shortage forced the library's 23 branches to remain closed on Sundays until further notice. Some library districts have begun increasing their staff salaries in an effort to keep employees from leaving for higher-paying jobs.

In Stark County, filling open positions hasn't been a significant issue, according to library representatives.

Jennifer Welsh, senior director of public services for the Stark County District Library, said the district library has seen an uptick in retirements prompted by the pandemic and an increase in competition for degreed librarian and managerial positions. Filling temporary positions, such as substitutes and custodial jobs, has been the bigger challenge, she said.

Sherie Brown, director of the Massillon Public Library, said keeping her existing staff healthy and on the job has proved the most challenging.

Three Massillon library employees tested positive within a 24-hour period, and others have been off work after being exposed to family members who tested positive for COVID-19. The library, which operates three branches with roughly 57 full-time and part-time employees, also has had several employees off work for extended periods of time after they contracted the virus. One employee had a second breakthrough case, while another is on their third quarantine, Brown said.

"This is heading down a concerning path, and I worry that we can sustain the hours of operation we just returned to in October," Brown said.

The library cited staffing issues when it announced it was closing its main library location at 208 Lincoln Way E. three hours early for two days last week. The Belloni Branch in Brewster and Askren Branch in Navarre were not affected.

Brown also said not having the take-home COVID-19 test kits available for residents takes a toll on the staff who are accustomed to helping.

"Libraries want to provide this service and are honored to have been chosen as accessible and trusted. We're just not used to saying 'no' as often as we are right now, and when half the staff is out sick, that makes for a stressful environment," Brown said.

Library directors say it often takes roughly a week after they order a new shipment of COVID-19 tests before the kits arrive. Even though the directors say they've ordered as many as 2,000 tests, the shipment is often 1,000 kits or fewer.

Information on whether a local library has kits available often is posted on the library's website and social media pages.

## **Adjusting the COVID-19 test kit distribution process**

Due to the recent surge in demand, some local libraries have adjusted how they're handling the test kit distribution to reduce the burden on staff.

At the North Canton Public Library, visitors now can grab up to two test kits at a self-serve pickup table in the building's breezeway before they enter the library. Previously, visitors had to call the library and a staff member would put the kit in a designated space or take it to the visitor's car.

"It put a lot of burden on our staff and we didn't feel comfortable with coming in contact with potentially sick patrons who were needing tests," said Andrea Legg, director of the North

Canton Public Library, which employs a staff of nearly 40 full-time and part-time workers.

Hutchison, of the Louisville Public Library, said the library no longer asks visitors to call a phone number to get a test. Now, a volunteer or staff member stands outside waiting for test seekers.

Callers to the North Canton and Louisville libraries also are now greeted with a message that states whether the library has any COVID-19 take-home tests available, in an effort to reduce the number of calls library employees must answer.

Hutchison said residents overall have been appreciative of the library's efforts.

"We have not experienced the rudeness (that others may have)," he said. "Everyone has been super happy that we are doing this."

*Columbus Dispatch* writer Dean Narciso contributed to this article.

Reach Kelli at 330-580-8339 or [kelli.weir@cantonrep.com](mailto:kelli.weir@cantonrep.com).

On Twitter: @kweirREP

## **New library mask requirements**

The Canal Fulton and North Canton libraries have announced new mask requirements, citing a spike in COVID-19 cases in the community.

Patrons to the Canal Fulton Public Library ages 2 and older now must wear a mask when entering the building, unless they cannot wear one due to health, medical or religious reasons.

The library will offer a single-use mask for those who do not have a facial covering. Those who do not want to wear a mask can access online services, eBooks and a walk-up drawer outside the building.

At the North Canton Public Library, patrons ages 2 and older must wear a mask when interacting with library staff and when attending in-person programs, including art classes. Masks are not required when browsing inside the building and not interacting with staff.

The Massillon Public Library has moved its storytimes scheduled for January to a virtual format. More information, including the Zoom links, is available on the library's website.

