



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

Joint Senate Health & Human Services Committee and Communications & Technology
Committee Hearing on the Procurement of Contact Tracing Services

Testimony of
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Good morning Chairs Brooks, Haywood, Phillips-Hill, Kane, and members of both the Senate Health & Human Services Committee and Senate Communications & Technology Committee. I am Alison Beam, Acting Secretary of the Department of Health and joining me is Executive Deputy Secretary Keara Klinepeter.

We are here today to discuss the procurement of a new contact tracing vendor supporting the Pennsylvania Department of Health in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Case investigations and contact tracing are utilized as tools for many other infectious diseases such as measles and tuberculosis and are some of the most basic and critical public health tools as means for both disease surveillance and prevention. Given its role as a critical tool in the Department's continued response to the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, having support for contact tracing efforts from an external partner will allow the Department to work to prevent further spread of this virus and continue to protect the public health with a level of support that reflects the level of spread across Pennsylvania.

First, before discussing this specific procurement, it may be helpful to the committee for us to offer a brief understanding of the notification process that occurs after a person tests positive for COVID-19. When a patient receives a positive test result, that patient's information is entered (or electronically sent) by the testing provider into the Pennsylvania National Electronic Disease Surveillance System, or PA-NEDSS. Contact information for the patient is included to allow a case investigation to begin.

The case investigation process is usually undertaken by a clinically trained individual such as a public health nurse, who will confirm specific details from the patient on their health status, when their symptoms began, what symptoms the patient is experiencing, and close contacts – such as household members, co-workers, or anyone who would have potentially been exposed to the patient in a way that meets the virus' exposure criteria of 6-feet or less for 15 cumulative minutes or more. Those close contacts are compiled, and contact information is gathered for those individuals. Finally, the patient is informed of the appropriate isolation protocols to ensure that infection isn't further spread to others. This is the point of closure for the case investigation and the transition into the process of contact tracing.

Information regarding the close contacts identified by the patient through a case investigation is then handed off to staff performing contact tracing. This process involves appropriately trained



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

contact tracers outreaching to the close contacts identified by the patient and informing them that they have been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19. The contact tracer does not share the information of the patient, as the process is anonymous to protect the patient's identity. The contact tracer will ask the identified contact if they are experiencing any symptoms and, if symptoms exist, offer guidance on testing. If no current symptoms exist, the individual is informed to self-monitor for any symptoms. They are also offered voluntary enrollment in the Sara Alert system, which assists with symptom monitoring through daily check-ins. At the conclusion of the process, the individual is informed of the appropriate quarantine protocols through a required time frame.

Thankfully, due to many Pennsylvanians' willingness to be vaccinated along with the increased availability of vaccine, cases of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth are not at the troubling levels we saw earlier in the pandemic or even earlier this year. Currently, the Delta variant poses the most risk, as it is more transmissible than the initial virus or other variants. Unfortunately, individuals unwilling or unable to be vaccinated are most at risk of infection. Overall, Pennsylvania is not seeing the same level of COVID-19 cases that is being reported in other areas of the country. This could be linked to Pennsylvania having higher vaccination numbers than those states, as we have seen a correlation between individuals getting vaccinated and declining case counts. However, as we see case counts increase elsewhere, the continued need exists for a robust contact tracing effort within the Commonwealth to ensure Pennsylvanians are safe.

Recently, the Department of Health submitted an Emergency Procurement Approval Request to the Department of General Services for the provision of contact tracing services on June 23, 2021. Since this is a critical tool in disease prevention and control, the Department is utilizing an emergency procurement for these services to meet the ongoing public health needs of Pennsylvanians.

For context, here is the Department's process for determining the use of an emergency procurement and how an emergency procurement is executed. The Department utilizes a process to ensure judicious use of emergency procurements. First, Department program staff discuss internally to determine what services or supplies are needed and if it is time sensitive for saving lives. Program staff then receives verbal approval from Department leadership, legal, and procurement to ensure agreement that an emergency procurement is necessary. Under our currently instituted process, this is now a written approval from the Executive Deputy Secretary.

Following that, program staff completes the Emergency Procurement Justification Form and submits internally to Department procurement staff for review and approval. Emergency Procurement requests are again shared with agency leadership for awareness and Department



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procurement staff sends the request form to DGS for official approval. If approved, program staff works with the Department's legal and procurement office for terms and conditions, statement of work, etc. and the procurement office creates the purchase order. If needed, the contract is circulated for signatures and once executed the vendor's work begins.

However, moving forward, we have issued guidance within the Department that directs staff to request the use of emergency procurements very conservatively. In addition to the steps above, any emergency procurement request that staff believe is warranted must also be reviewed and approved by the Executive Deputy Secretary prior to requesting emergency procurement approval from the Department of General Services through its emergency procurement approval process. Again, this process allows for the Department to procure the services needed to urgently address areas where there are threats to health, welfare, and safety of Pennsylvanians, but assures prudence in their use going forward.

For the specifics of this procurement, the term of the contract is, at base, a one-year contract with two optional three-month renewals, which could extend the term to an eighteen-month contract in total. While it is largely dependent on the unpredictable nature of the virus, we do not anticipate case-counts reaching the level which would require an additional contract beyond the term of this new procurement. It is important to note that based on current case counts, the cost of these services is likely to be much closer to \$9 million, but we have prudently prepared for future needs and set a maximum ceiling of \$34 million. The contract will be paid for using federal COVID-19 funding provided to the state for this purpose. The cost is conditional on the number of case investigators and contact tracers needed in Pennsylvania through the life of the contract. At this time, the Department intends to utilize Commonwealth staff to maintain contact tracing efforts as needed when this contract concludes.

As noted in the Emergency Procurement Approval Request, the Department was primarily looking for a vendor who had a proven track record and experience in offering this service in other states and jurisdictions. This was important given the short turnaround needed to onboard a new vendor. Similarly, a vendor already on the Commonwealth's Invitation to Qualify (ITQ) list, which includes vendors who have already agreed to Commonwealth terms and conditions, was also preferable given the need to onboard a vendor quickly once a procurement is finalized..

Additionally, safeguards regarding information security, contractor responsibility, HIPAA compliance, and data privacy are included in this contract to ensure that the new vendor will hold true to the high standards we expect for this highly sensitive work. While prior vendor contracts included similar provisions, we are committed to ensuring that any future partner utilizes only the approved secure systems as required by the Commonwealth. Further, while this is a staffing



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

contract and not an IT contract, we will ensure that any new vendor has the appropriate controls in place to prevent inappropriate access or sharing of private health information of individuals contacted by the vendor. Pennsylvanians deserve confidence in this process, and we will utilize every available measure to reaffirm that confidence.

As a matter of public trust, the Department takes the safety and security of individuals' personal information very seriously. The contact tracing process is a core part of disease prevention and control in public health. As such, through our contractual terms and oversight, we are taking steps to earn Pennsylvanians' trust. We want Pennsylvanians to know that when they give their information to a public health representative, it is treated with the utmost care and security. Being notified of a potential COVID-19 exposure is stressful enough for Pennsylvanians, and those individuals should be afforded the peace of mind to know that any information they share through the contact tracing process is secure. We are working hard every day to affirm that trust through our work and the work of our partners, not only for COVID-19, but in all our activities.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer remarks. I am happy to take any questions you may have.