

Syphilis in Bernalillo County

Executive statement

Syphilis is on the rise in Bernalillo County, with a rate over 3x the national average of cases per 100k, resulting in a Public Health Order to comply with best practices from the CDC for increased screening amongst pregnant women. Since delayed diagnoses result in more severe health consequences, and there has been a 660% increase in DOH-reported cases of congenital syphilis over a 5 year period, it is critical to increase detection and treatment, with targeted actions for at-risk populations.

Background

Syphilis is commonly tested for with a blood test that returns results in 3-4 days, after which the results are conveyed by a phone call. For members of the community without a phone, this presents a barrier to receiving results and the appropriate antibiotic treatment. There is currently only one site in Albuquerque that provides rapid Syphilis testing all business days, the New Mexico Harm Reduction Collaborative. Positive tests are referred to the Midtown Public Health Office for antibiotic treatment. NMHRC staff were initially able to offer an incentive for participation (\$10 initially, with another \$10 after follow-up treatment obtained) and report that this increased participation. Rapid test kits and incentives were provided by NMDOH.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Rapid Syphilis test kits at all congregate shelters and offered at Public Health Offices to people without a cell phone

Advertise testing and provide participatory incentives with emphasis on follow-up treatment. Antibiotics should be immediately available onsite for positive results, instead of a referral to an off-site provider. Increase test availability (only at WEHC) beyond current 4 hours/week.

Recommendation 2: Rapid pregnancy tests at congregate shelters and service providers

Advertise testing and provide syphilis rapid screening as indicated by positive test result.

Recommendation 3: Outreach and educational campaign

Expand syphilis outreach and education to youth settings, including community centers, bars, clubs, and concerts (e.g. Johnny Boards and tablers). Info-campaigns should include free testing locations, recommended testing intervals (3-6 months with multiple sexual partners), signs/symptoms, and exposure mechanisms. Current site <https://nmhivguide.org/syphilis.php> is mostly provider-focused.

Recommendation 4: Increase outreach providers' access to condoms and safer sex supplies

People are more curious to "test out" novelty condoms, such as flavored, textured, etc.

Recommendation 5: Encourage providers to issue Expedited Partner Therapy medication to sex partners of a person with a positive syphilis test.

Emphasize that this can be done even if prescribed to "unnamed partner."