

Background Screeners Turn to COVID-19 Testing

By Dave Zielinski

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Looking for help with testing employees for COVID-19? Try your background screener.

Background-screening companies have begun offering COVID-19 testing and administration services as a natural extension of their existing business offerings. These providers, which conduct pre-employment background checks on job candidates, are leveraging relationships with nationwide laboratories, along with established technology platforms and compliance expertise, to help organizations test employees who are returning to the workplace.

New York City-based Sterling is one background screener now offering such end-to-end health testing services.

"We've seen a growing desire for testing as part of companies' return-to-the-workplace planning," said Peter Lehman, chief strategy officer for Sterling. "Organizations want to know who to test and how often, the best place to get testing, and the best way to manage the process of receiving and reporting on results."

Sterling offers testing for the active virus as well as antibody tests, Lehman said. Guidance from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) allows organizations to conduct viral tests because they're permissible under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But requiring an antibody test—which identifies those who have previously been infected with the virus—before allowing employees entry to the workplace would violate the ADA, according to the EEOC, because antibody tests constitute a medical examination under the ADA.

Workers can be tested onsite, often a preferred option if there are many people in one location who need to be tested or retested—such as in a warehouse distribution center or a factory. "Organizations who have medical staff can collect these tests themselves, but more often we provide third-party medical staff to do the collection," Lehman said.

A second option allows employees to use self-collection kits for home testing. Workers are observed taking their sample by a medical professional—typically over a video call—to confirm the employee's identity and that the sample is being properly collected. "This is a good option for testing employees who are reporting symptoms," Lehman said.

A third option is for employees to be tested at a clinic.

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Turnkey Services

A key objective of background screeners is to provide the kind of end-to-end services that can remove some of the challenges of administering COVID-19 testing for organizations. "When the results come back, they are placed on a secure portal and can be viewed by workers," Lehman said. "The platforms we use to register employees and report results are part of our core background-screening system."

Temperature and Symptom Checks

Another background-screening company offering COVID-19 screening services is Atlanta-based InfoMart. The company recently unveiled its SymTem app for coronavirus screening, a tool for employees to take their temperature and conduct a symptom assessment test, said Tammy Cohen, founder and chief visionary officer at InfoMart. The app also includes trend reporting by business location and health care referrals for symptomatic users.

"Based on their daily test [results], employees receive a digital badge that either directs them to go into work or to stay at home," Cohen said.

She noted that the app complies with federal regulations and guidance. "We've addressed all of the various compliance requirements inside the platform," she said. "But [employers] also can customize the app to their own unique policies and procedures, because we know how important flexibility is in this environment."

Compliance Experience

Background screeners believe their history of having to comply with a web of government regulations—including complying with the Fair Credit Reporting Act, which regulates the use of consumer investigative and credit reports—is an advantage in the highly regulated COVID-19 testing environment. "Organizations are very concerned about being compliant as they incorporate testing results into their decision making around returning to the workplace," Lehman said.

Cohen said InfoMart has been protecting sensitive job candidate data for decades, and the security and compliance protocols it has in place give the company a leg up when offering COVID-19 screening. The company also has conducted virtual drug testing and developed a mobile onboarding tool that helped in creating the app for coronavirus symptom testing. "Our existing back-end technology has been an advantage," Cohen said.

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