

The Mechanics of State Systems to Certify Recovery from COVID-19

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Introduction

State systems to certify people as recovered from COVID-19 can create a large specialized labor pool that will help limit the spread of COVID-19, moderate economic free-fall in the short term, and speed economic recovery in the medium term. We laid out the case for a certification system in [STATnews](#). Politicians are now considering certification in Italy and elsewhere. It is time for states to get it done.

[As we emphasized in STATnews](#), those who have recovered from COVID-19 have a vital role to play. As they are either immune or highly resistant to reinfection they can work or volunteer with lower risk of endangering themselves or accelerating the epidemic. They can work in front line high-contact positions in medical care, elder care, retail and other sectors both to keep the economy moving and to slow the spread of COVID-19 overall, and particularly slow the spread to vulnerable groups.

State certification solves an important problem. Employers or volunteer coordinators need to know who is recovered, but employees will have every incentive to lie about it if they can. Employers, customers, and fellow employees need a system they can trust.

This document describes the mechanics for how a certification system could work and the urgency of implementation.

Why Certification Efforts Should Start Now

We should start now to build such certification systems so that they are ready when there are large numbers of tested recovered people. There may already be hundreds of thousands of people who are recovered in the US. Soon there will be millions. Although testing has been limited at this point, testing will expand markedly over the next year and many of the recovered people will ultimately be tested for antibody immunity or for active virus or both. Certification systems will help make the most of this resource.

While there are many unknowns – including the duration of immunity – the economic and health emergency dictates that it is time to move fast. We can adjust course as data comes in.

Database and Certification Specifics

Public health officials keep detailed records, and already have substantial records on COVID-19 testing.

A rudimentary first-stage certification system could link existing public health records to an identity document (e.g. driver's license, RealID or passport), and provide a query system. It should do something like the following:

- Assign each person meeting the criteria a unique certification number, different from any other ID that may be associated with their public health records. Link this record to an identity document such as a driver's license.
- Create a system to allow individuals to view their own certification status, including the date and nature of each test that went into the certification.
- Tell participants that they can voluntarily provide their certification number and ID to employers together with a signed authorization that allows the employer to verify their recovered status.
- Grant only basic information to most employers or volunteer groups, but allow some more sophisticated high contact employers to discover more data, including the nature and type of each test, with appropriate disclosures.
- Ensure that all data handling complies with HIPAA privacy rules and other relevant privacy protections. Work to assure the public that this last assertion is true, and that asserting their recovered status will not result in disclosures of their recovery status beyond the authorized bounds.

Who gets Certification?

Different scenarios involve different risks of false positives, and health officials will have to create standards for what evidence is sufficient to qualify. For example nasal swab tests indicate a current viral infection, and blood serum tests look for antibodies indicating a past infection. Together they can be used to give a strong indication that a person is recovered. However there are many possible combinations such as:

- Complete case history including case numbers, positive swab tests, matching symptoms, and a record of recovery.
- Single positive swab test, but the individual does not report having experienced symptoms.
- Severe matching symptoms reported by a medical facility, but no matching swab test on record.
- Self-reported symptoms with a confirming antibody test after recovery.
- Antibody test only.

Health officials will have to decide what case histories qualify automatically for the program, and which require additional confirming tests.

Certification may also be for limited time periods. As more information about the degree of immunity and duration of immunity of the recovered emerges the certification period can be adjusted.

Privacy Safeguards

Participation should be voluntary. Moreover, participation itself should not allow any employer to verify a participant's status. Participants can choose to prove their "recovered" status by showing their certification number plus the proper matching ID (e.g. RealID or passport) to a prospective employer. The employer or venue would enter both into a state database, and get back a status.

In order to encourage all workers to participate, personally identifiable information should only be released pursuant to an individual's authorization or to court order and if by court order pursuant to the advice of the state attorney general's office that the court order should be observed and not appealed.

Publicity

Publicizing the system to employers and medical care providers and reassuring the public of the identity protections designed into the program are both important. It must be emphasized that recovered persons may have immunity from new infection, but they can still spread virus mechanically. Good hygiene practices are still required.

Conclusion

We are in an emergency. Emergencies require action and ignoring some problems that would otherwise need to be addressed at the outset. Now is the time to start a certification for persons recovered or immune from COVID-19, knowing that it will not be perfect. At times like this the best cannot be the enemy of the good.

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