
Local Medical Equipment Company, Pandemic Startup Partner to Protect Employees with Innovative COVID-19 Antibody Testing Program

MPE-INC Aims to Increase Workplace Safety, Gain Business Intelligence Through Work with Novir

MILWAUKEE (Sept. 2, 2020) -- A local medical equipment design and manufacturing services company has turned to a Milwaukee-based pandemic startup to bring COVID-19 rapid antibody testing to its more than 200 employees.

Novir is offering the unique antibody testing program to workers at MPE-INC -- the same employees who will also begin manufacturing Novir testing kits this fall.

For Novir -- launched this spring by a longtime former GE Healthcare executive turned digital medical entrepreneur -- it is a chance to showcase its business model with its new local manufacturing partner. For MPE-INC, the all-employee testing program is an attempt to increase worker safety, foster peace of mind, gain business intelligence, reduce costly downtime, save on health care costs, and ensure business continuity.

“You need both diagnostic and inexpensive antibody testing to do this right,” Novir President Alexander Kempe said. “Diagnostic testing only tells part of the story. And you can’t rely on symptoms alone to know who has or had the virus. Forget about temperature checks at the door. Those don’t really help you. You need comprehensive testing plans, and we can help solve that at Novir.”

Milwaukee-based Assurance Laboratories administered the first round of tests for about 130 MPE-INC employees on August 19, with additional follow-up testing planned for September. Along the way, Novir will work with MPE-INC to share data and actionable insights linked to it.

The first round of testing showed 10 employees tested were positive for COVID-19 antibodies. This includes four people who were known to have had the illness previously. Another four positive cases showed evidence of “recent antibodies” and may

be infectious; they were sent home immediately with recommendations to get a PCR test and monitor for symptoms -- an example of the actionable information available to MPE-INC within minutes of the antibody testing.

“The virus isn’t going away, and the more we know, the safer we can be,” MPE-INC Chief Financial Officer Tom Groble said. “That means the line workers are safe, our office is safe, everyone is safe at work. The antibody testing is another tool to help us stay safe and ensure we can continue business operations building lifesaving medical devices.”

Antibody testing has become more critical as the pandemic has deepened and prevalence of the virus has increased, and will free up diagnostic testing capacity by identifying those who have already had the virus.

Unlike PCR “active virus” testing, Novir’s program will initially focus on inexpensive and rapid antibody testing to show if employees have either immunoglobulin M or immunoglobulin G antibodies in their blood -- found in people who have already had COVID-19. The test also shows active virus in some cases.

The test is reliable and authorized by the FDA, and results are returned within minutes -- significant at a time when the availability of COVID-19 virus testing is increasingly in question and wait times for results can measure in days.

Said Groble: “What is the cost of having five people out of work, and we take down one of our assembly lines? That is one of the real values in this testing program. Without a test, for those who may have been exposed to a positive case who don’t have symptoms, your alternative is to quarantine for 14 days.”

In addition to potentially allowing healthy workers to return to work more quickly, the testing may also find workers who have the virus but may be asymptomatic. “What if we find three or four positive employees? This test can help us prevent an outbreak,” Groble said. “That alone is worth the investment.”

Those types of questions have been on the minds of MPE-INC leaders since the start of the pandemic. Because the company makes ventilator assemblies and other products

used in the fight against COVID-19, it has been deemed an “essential business” during the pandemic and remained fully operational. A small number of employees tested positive for the virus, and the company reacted quickly to keep those workers and the team safe.

But while they avoided a significant shutdown, it hampered efficiency as employees who tested positive and those who were in close contact were quarantined. The company wanted a better, more proactive approach, to addressing COVID-19. Enter, Novir.

The partnership started coming together in the early days of the pandemic this spring, as Novir sought a local manufacturer for its tests, and found an industry leader in its backyard. MPE-INC, a FDA registered facility, will begin making antibody testing kits for Novir in November -- a year after the first case of the virus was confirmed in China -- and provide them a dependable, high-quality and local source for the product.

“It’s a terrific partnership,” said MPE’s President and Chief Executive Officer Hank Kohl. “The return on an investment for testing is easy to see. And I believe that pursuing this initiative upholds our role as a responsible employer for the greater good to our employees, the community and customers. We are a safe place to work, and we’re proactively proving it, not just saying it.”

Novir expects other large employers, universities, schools and other organizations will want to do the same. “This is a program to bring people safely back to work and back to campus, and keep them there,” Kempe said.

Additional Information

About Novir

Novir, founded in Milwaukee in April, offers a turnkey COVID-19 testing program which includes ready access to FDA-authorized, high-quality rapid serological antibody tests, diagnostic tests (including PCR tests), and shortly point-of-care antigen tests, all supported by a technology platform to provide actionable baseline data to support wide scale testing efforts in managing COVID risk effectively. It seeks to provide a comprehensive, cost-effective and customizable approach to help people get back to work and students and teachers back to campus confidently and quickly in these uncertain times.

Its founder, Alexander Kempe, has two and a half decades of operating and investment management experience in the healthcare industry, in majority with GE Healthcare (“GEHC”) in a number of strategic, operational and financial leadership positions in the U.S. and in Europe. He is the former Director of Strategic Alliances & Vice President of Home Health at GEHC, and prior roles include: General Manager of GEHC Americas, former Chief Financial Officer, and Vice Chairman GEHC EMEA and GEHC Kretztechnik (NM: KTA). He founded an investment firm, 37celsius Capital Partners, focused on digital health companies on a global basis.

Joining him is Vice President, Sales & Marketing, Craig Loomis. Loomis has 27 years of global product development and marketing experience in the healthcare industry, the majority with GE Healthcare. Chief Medical Officer Dr. Dirk Steinert has more than 25 years of clinical practice. He has an active clinical practice and has held various clinical leadership positions, the majority within Ascension WI. Steinert founded Steinert Consulting, LLC supporting clients in the pharmaceutical industry as well as home health and nursing with clinical advice.

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About MPE-INC

MPE-INC is a leading design and manufacturing partner to healthcare and technology OEMs, leveraging core competencies in product design and engineering, high mix/low volume manufacturing, quality systems and 3PL services. For more than 40 years, MPE has successfully serviced an impressive list of blue-chip medical device and technology OEMs, leveraging a vertically integrated business model that offers its growing customer base “Concept to Completion” solutions. MPE-INC is headquartered in Milwaukee.

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