



New Website Aims to Help People Access COVID-19 Testing

John P. Mello Jr.

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Project Baseline, a new website to facilitate screening and testing of people potentially infected with the COVID-19 virus, became available on Sunday. Verily, a company owned by Google parent Alphabet, launched the site.

Access requires a Google login, and assistance currently is limited to residents in two counties in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In addition to administering the website, Verily, which focuses on health and life sciences, is working with state, local and federal authorities to establish testing sites in the Bay Area.

Alphabet and Google CEO Sundar Pichai also announced the companies are partnering with the federal government on a COVID-19 education and prevention, and a local resources website, expected to go live late Monday.

The site's focus is on best practices for prevention, with links to authoritative information from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as well as helpful tips and tools for individuals, teachers and businesses.

Privacy Concerns

Before Verily's testing site was 24 hours old, there were signs it already might be having traffic problems.

"When I tested it [(Monday), after answering questions in a way that would qualify me in terms of geography and lack of initial symptoms, it said it's not accepting any more applicants," said Michael Arrigo, an expert witness in healthcare who lives in the Bay Area.

"It seems like it's not allowing people to be screened in the counties where they could be screened," he told TechNewsWorld.

Google did not respond to our request to comment for this story.

The Verily website raises privacy concerns, Arrigo noted.

"It's not clear to consumers that the information Verily is gathering is being given to entities not covered by HIPAA," he explained.

HIPAA, the 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, protects the privacy of healthcare information collected in the United States.

"Verily is interested in capturing a lot of information," Arrigo continued, "but there should be more information up front for the consumer."

At this point, the benefits of the site are unclear, he said, "but one thing that's clear is there's tremendous benefit for Google in collecting data."

Google Responds to COVID-19

The new website launches were among a number of things Pichai said the Alphabet companies were doing in response to the spreading coronavirus, including the following:

- Taking down thousands of dangerous or misleading videos about the virus on YouTube and removing false and harmful information on Google Maps, such as false reviews and bogus information about healthcare locations.
- Blocking hundreds of thousands of ads attempting to exploit the pandemic, including a temporary ban on ads for medical masks and respirators.
- Making a commitment of US\$50 million through Google.org to the global COVID-19 response.
- Matching up to \$5 million in donations to the WHO's new COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund.
- Awarding a \$500,000 grant to a team of researchers, epidemiologists and software developers at Boston Children's Hospital working on HealthMap, a website that provides up-to-date trends of emerging public health threats and outbreaks.
- Creating COVID-19 public service announcements through the \$25 million Google Ad Grants crisis relief program.
- Establishing a COVID-19 fund to provide paid sick leave to temporary staff and vendors who miss work because they have potential symptoms of the virus or are quarantined.

"In this unprecedented moment, we feel a great responsibility to help," said Pichai. "We'll keep doing everything we can to deliver on our mission, and help people take care of themselves and their communities."

Free Team Software

While few high-tech companies can launch as large a response to the coronavirus as Google has, other companies have found ways to contribute to the cause. Cloudflare, for example, is making

its Cloudflare for Teams product -- which allows employees to collaborate from home -- free to small businesses for six months.

Small businesses "are responsible for the creation of two-thirds of net new jobs," noted Cloudflare CEO Matthew Prince.

"Unfortunately, they are much more vulnerable to even minor interruptions in their operations. Oftentimes their margins are so thin that any significant new expense or reduction in revenue can cause them to fail," he pointed out.

"While the impact of the Coronavirus is being felt by businesses large and small, I am worried the impact on small businesses could be especially devastating," Prince added. "Small businesses have always been there for us and we want to be there for them during this time of increased strain"

In addition to offering its team software for free, Cloudflare has established an online business hub where small businesses can see technology services available to them for free or at a low cost.

Companies operating with an expanded work-at-home workforce should be cautious, said Marty Puranik, CEO of Atlantic.Net, a cloud hosting company in Orlando, Florida.

"Bad actors will try to take advantage of your situation. You're going to have a lot of new remote workers, so you need to have policies and procedures in place to make sure they don't fall for phishing scams and wire money where it isn't supposed to be sent," he warned.

"The security industry should take the lead and educate people on remote worker security," Puranik told TechNewsWorld.

Zoom for Kids

Employees won't be the only folks hanging around the house during the pandemic. There's also some 400 million students worldwide, many of them looking for something to do. Among the companies addressing the problem is Caribu, which is offering its video-calling app for free during the virus outbreak.

With the app, kids can create virtual playdates where they can read books from the Caribu library of popular titles, play games and color together on screen.

"Kids are feeling the effects of the outbreak, but don't always understand why grandma can't come visit, why the special family spring break trip may have been canceled, or why they're out of school for weeks," said Caribu CEO Max Tuchman.

"Everything we do is about creating more meaningful connections, and that's what we think is most important right now -- keeping families connected in the most engaging way," he continued.

"We're like Zoom for kids," Tuchman added.

Taking the Lead

Technology companies have to take a leadership role in the battle against COVID-19, urged Gene Munster, managing partner at Loup Ventures, a venture capital firm in Minneapolis.

"It's an ironic leadership position because government's message for the past year has been about breaking up Big Tech. Now we have an example of why it's good to have Big Tech," he told TechNewsWorld.

"Big Tech has some of the best AI talent in the world, and in these situations they can help with everything from understanding how these diseases are transmitted to working on vaccines," Munster added.

Big Tech has the potential to reach large numbers of people with information of substantial benefit to them, Julian Sanchez, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a public policy think tank in Washington, D.C., told TechNewsWorld. "But it remains to be seen -- because of all the misinformation we've seen circulating -- whether they'll be a net positive force as this crisis unfolds.