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have been running Nashville testing sites ever since.

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How do you make an invisible enemy visible? In the case of infectious diseases like the novel coronavirus, the answer is testing.

It's why long before the gates open at 7 a.m. at Nissan stadium, Dr. Julie Gray and Amber DuVentre are there.

Why they run between tents to bring fresh test kits to patients. Why they secure coolers filled with newly collected swabs. Why they make sure volunteers have proper protective equipment. Why they even haul away the trash.

And it's why long after the last patient has left for the day, they're counting tests, collecting data and planning for the next day.

They are keeping things running at Nashville's busiest testing site. Clocking in more than 30,000 steps a day, DuVentre is winning every Fitbit challenge these days.

The two are part of a team of six from Meharry Medical College who are powering one of the city's most essential tools in combating the spread of the coronavirus. For five months the group has been orchestrating the logistical ins-and-outs of keeping free testing going in Nashville.

The city operates three testing sites — at Nissan Stadium, at Meharry's North Nashville campus and at a Kmart in Antioch. Together, these sites through Friday have conducted more than 85,000 tests — about 44% of all tests done in Davidson County since the end of March. These tests, along with contact tracing, are essential for the city to stay on top of potential outbreaks.

It's provided a unique challenge and opportunity for Meharry Medical College, its staff and its medical students. And it's no surprise that the six, speaking recently to The Tennessean

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embraced it,” said Anthony Thomas, who is helping run operations at the Meharry testing site. “We’re very thankful to the city for the opportunity to run these testing sites for the city ... to get to show people who Meharry is and what we could do.”

It hasn't been easy.

Testing capacity reached an all-time high in July when cases hit record levels in the city. Long lines formed at each site and sometimes the wait for results grew so long it wasn't until after the infection ended that some people learned their results, rendering some tests useless.

Cases grew so fast it strained testing and contact tracing efforts locally and across the country. But now, testing is down with daily tests conducted in the city dropping about 38% from July to August — the latest wrinkle in Nashville’s coronavirus fight.

"I'm afraid to even speak to it to be very honest," Gray said in late July, just as she was seeing the number of people showing up at the sites begin to fall. "We've not stopped what we're doing just because people have not come out as much for testing."

The decrease in testing narrows the city’s view on the virus and casts a faint shadow of uncertainty over the city’s recent progress. While fewer tests doesn't invalidate the recent decline in new infections, it does raise the possibility that officials cannot measure the outbreak as accurately as they once could.

It's why they're now calling for a renewed testing effort.

"We are here," Gray said.

'Where else would we be?'

After a recent summer downpour, Shannon Roberson sat in her car, finally eating a salad for lunch with her toes wet from the puddles in her shoes.

She chuckled at how if Mother Nature had waited just a few minutes, she and the rest of the team at the Kmart testing site in Antioch could have wrapped up for the day without getting wet.

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repair bays. Workers from a fajita house across the street come over, with little pineapple juice on a hot summer day.

The Dunkin' down the way brings over doughnut holes.

The testing site is the closest one for those who live in Southeast Nashville, an area that includes a large portion of the city's Hispanic and New American population, which have represented an outsized share of COVID-19 cases in Nashville.

It's also a community the city has struggled to effectively reach and provide critical services to in order to contain the spread of the virus.

Meharry has done mobile testing during off hours and on the weekends in Southeast Nashville to meet a need among residents like factory or construction workers or day laborers who can't get tested during the normal hours of operation at the testing site.

The college has also teamed up with several predominantly Black churches across the county to provide free COVID-19 testing on Saturdays. The success of the weekend testing stands in stark contrast to an earlier failed testing effort by state officials, to have uniformed Tennessee National Guard go into public housing and conduct door-to-door testing.

"I think it's a trust factor," said Michelle Viera, who works alongside Thomas and Dr. Rahwa Mehari at the Meharry testing site.

Nationwide, coronavirus infections and deaths are dramatically more common among Black residents and other people of color. The same is true in Tennessee. Black residents make up 17% of the state's population but account for about a third of all coronavirus deaths, according to the Vanderbilt University Department of Health Policy.

Those at Meharry knew the COVID-19 pandemic would spare no demographic group. But people who historically have underlying health conditions, paired with healthcare disparities resulting from longstanding inequalities, are more susceptible to getting sick and dying.

Mehari said the college knew communities of color, especially Nashville's Black community, would be hit particularly hard.

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'We got used to making the sacrifice'

These front-line workers continue to work the testing sites knowing the risks that exist for them and their families.

For Thomas, it's his mother who is in her 70s. For Gray, it means being extra cautious with her husband, who is also a healthcare provider and for her elderly mother who lives with them.

It means DuVentre missed a birthday of her "favorite girl," her first niece who turned 3 this summer.

And just as the stay-at-home slowdown has upended people's perception of time, it's true for the Meharrians as well.

"Time is standing still, right Michelle?" joked Thomas.

"It's almost like it's my life," Viera responded. "We are living and breathing COVID-19 six days a week ... anywhere from 10 to 12 hours a day."

Mehari thought back to March, when she initially thought their response work might last two to three weeks. They all agreed it seems COVID-19 is now a part of their normal lives.

With 20 weeks under their belts and no end in sight, Meharry plans to keep testing going indefinitely.

That means every day they'll be at the testing sites long before the gates open at 7 a.m.

"We got used to making the sacrifice. And at this point, it's really not a sacrifice. It's just a way of life," Thomas said. "We're living this until they come up with a vaccine. If (the virus) is around for the next 15 years, I guess we'll be here to make sure the testing is taken care of."

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