

# Experiment ends as only 1 of 13 arrivals in Utah bothered to fill out requested health forms

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An experiment to identify people arriving in Utah who pose a risk to spread COVID-19 never went well from the beginning — when it accidentally sent repeated, annoying texts to residents near state borders. So it was allowed to expire quietly on Friday.

In the end, only one of every 13 cars or airline passengers that entered the state bothered to file forms as requested asking if they had symptoms or had been in coronavirus hot spots, according to analysis by The Salt Lake Tribune of data it obtained from the state.

And only 25 people were asked to self-isolate because of data collected during the three-week experiment.

“It was certainly a unique idea,” said Tom Hudachko, spokesman for the Utah Department of Health. “It’s always worth it to us if we’re able to reach out, make some one-on-one contact with some information that could be helpful and prevent a downstream infection or two.”

The biggest problem came when the state tried to use a system — similar to one that sends out texts during amber alerts — to text drivers entering the state with a link to online forms and ask that they fill them out at their next stop.

“The technology was supposed to be good enough to work,” Carlos Braceras, director of the Utah Department of Transportation told the Utah Transportation Committee recently. It was supposed to send messages from cell towers near the border to out-of-state cars driving into a “geo-fenced” area. That didn’t work.

Residents in St. George, the Uintah Basin and on both sides of the Idaho border complained they frequently received those texts. State officials said one reported he received it 15 times, and another said that it happened almost whenever he entered his bathroom.

“A lot of us spent a lot of time on the phone with folks that were not pleased with that experiment,” Braceras said.

So the [state turned off that texting system](#) at highway points of entry after just three days, and instead used electronic signs asking people to fill out forms.

That made response rates tumble.

On April 10, [the first day of the experiment](#), data show that 34% of drivers of cars entering the state filled out forms as requested. By April 29, fewer than 2% did.

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The actual number of forms filed by highway drivers dropped by 95%, from nearly 3,700 a day at first to about 200.

Braceras noted there's a big difference between "getting a text message with an actual link that you could just click on" to see the form compared to seeing a temporary electronic sign "and having to remember the website you saw."

Things worked a bit better at Salt Lake City International Airport, where arriving passengers were handed a card with a QR code that allowed them to use smartphones to connect to the online health form.

Data show that 62% of them filed out forms the first day of the program. It declined in a roller coaster shape over time until just 36% filled them out as requested on April 29.

Overall, state data shows that about 280,000 people entered the state by highway or air during the three-week experiment, and about 21,000 filled out the forms. That is just 7.5%, or one of every 13 cars or air passengers entering.

So officials let the program — which was created through an executive order by Gov. Gary Herbert — expire without renewal on Friday.

Hudachko said it did some good. About 85 people, he said, were identified as needing some follow-up from the state because of concern raised by their answers.

"We did identify about 25 individuals who were potentially suspect cases or who self-identified as having tested positive," he said. "They were asked to self-isolate."