



# 100 days in, pandemic proves payoff of public investment in UMaine research

*By President Joan Ferrini-Mundy  
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When the life-or-death importance of good hand hygiene led to a global shortage in the supply of sanitizer early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Maine health care organizations looked to a long-time partner for help: the [University of Maine](#).

Our innovative chemical and biomedical engineering faculty met immediately – on a Sunday during the university’s spring break, no less – to study the formulations recommended by the FDA and World Health Organization. Using supplies they had on hand, the team produced 25 gallons of sanitizer that was sent straight to Lewiston’s Central Maine Medical Center.

To scale up to meet demand – our team initially fielded hundreds of emails daily about hand sanitizer production – [we collaborated with Maine’s craft distillers and brewers](#) who created the high-purity alcohol that university chemists and engineers mixed with peroxide and glycerol at our campus lab, before being bottled and distributed statewide.

Working in small teams of three to allow for appropriate physical distancing, UMaine has produced thousands of gallons of hospital-grade sanitizer and delivered it to more than 100 health care providers statewide, from MaineHealth to the Maliseet Health and Wellness Center. More importantly, we provided the technical assistance so that our business partners could pivot to producing their own, like Mossy Ledge Spirits in Etna, which has now made more than 7,000 gallons of sanitizer and is selling it at cost to other local small businesses so they can safely reopen.

As Maine’s needs in the face of this unprecedented pandemic have grown and evolved in the 100 days since Gov. Janet Mills [first declared a state of civil emergency](#), so has the resourcefulness of university researchers and the power of our partnerships.

From [deploying students and faculty in nursing](#) to long-term care facilities to [translating](#) technical COVID-19 scientific developments for Bangor Public Health and Community Services to [manufacturing more than 4,000 bottles of the testing solution](#) needed by Maine National Guard to perform fit tests of N95 masks for our first responders, UMaine has been on the front lines in the state’s fight against coronavirus.

Under the leadership of Chancellor Dannel Malloy and the university presidents, our colleagues across the University of Maine System also have uniquely stepped up to serve

state COVID-19 needs, transforming their campus gyms into homeless shelters, providing small businesses legal assistance navigating coronavirus-related regulations and graduating medical lab technicians so they could enter the workforce early.

Our collective efforts are saving lives and they are only possible due to decades of public investment in our flagship university and the university system. Thank you. It is the state- and federally funded faculty, graduate assistants, laboratories and materials you have supported that have enabled UMaine and other system universities to be so responsive in combating coronavirus, and which will increasingly be called upon to help Maine mitigate future public health outbreaks and rebuild our economy.

As we've been leading in the response to COVID-19, UMaine has also been uniquely feeling its financial fallout. Within days of the closure of our residence halls, we returned \$7.8 million for unused room and board to our students, and will lose millions more due to the cancellation of conferences, camps and cultural and athletic events. Meanwhile, we continue to honor our commitment to provide pay and benefit stability through June 30 for our employees regardless of their ability to work remotely, including more than 400 UMaine employees on voluntary leave or furlough. We know doing so is necessary for the financial security of their families and our local communities.

And while our researchers have been refocused on designing intubation boxes, helping hospitals understand the scientific literature on PPE sterilization and adhering to stay-at-home orders, we have been unable to advance an estimated \$22 million in externally funded grant research. Given all this, UMaine is entering its next fiscal year with an eight-figure budget shortfall, with expenses escalating as we hope to reopen safely this fall.

With extraordinary pressure on the state's budget in the months ahead, we know legislators face challenging choices. But as this pandemic has proven, there is perhaps no greater investment to protect Maine's public and economic health than in its public universities.

*Joan Ferrini-Mundy is the president of the University of Maine and its regional campus, the University of Maine at Machias. She served on the strategic work team informing the development of the state's 10-year economic development strategy and helped chair the working group of higher education leaders who developed the framework to guide the reopening of Maine's colleges and universities.*