



Powell Street is seen nearly empty | Getty Images

California anxious over coronavirus spread among homeless residents

By VICTORIA COLLIVER 04/16/2020 12:16 PM EDT

OAKLAND — When San Francisco tested its largest homeless shelter for the coronavirus, the results weren't what anyone was expecting.

More than half of the 182 residents and staff at the Multi-Service Center South — 102 people — tested positive for the virus as of Wednesday, with the vast majority asymptomatic. The entire shelter was tested after two individuals last week showed signs of the virus.

The infection rate among San Francisco's entire homeless population can't be known without widespread testing, which isn't likely anytime soon. But in a densely populated city with surprising success thus far controlling the spread of coronavirus, officials fear the surprise results could foretell a late surge among homeless people that will be difficult to control.

“There was a homeless crisis before Covid-19. We were struggling as a city to deal with it and make progress but, in fact, it was getting worse,” said Karen Hanrahan, president and CEO of the Glide Foundation, a San Francisco nonprofit that provides services to the homeless. “When you layer on top Covid-19, it's a potential catastrophe waiting to happen.”

Homeless people were never expected to be the first to contract the virus given that many of the early infections were associated with international travel and conferences, said Steve Berg, vice president of programs and policy for the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

“There's no way of knowing how many homeless people have already been exposed to the disease,” Berg said. But when it gets to shelters like San Francisco’s as well as homeless encampments, “it’s probably going to spread pretty rapidly.”

The homeless population has challenges that make it difficult for many to comply with physical distancing and other orders to curb the spread of the virus. Many have multiple health conditions — including mental health issues and substance use disorders — while some have refused offers of hotel rooms. Others may not believe they have the virus if they have no symptoms.

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San Francisco was among the six Bay Area counties to announce the first regional shelter-in-place order in the country and has managed to avoid the massive surge of cases that has overwhelmed hospitals in New York and other major hot spots, recording 1,013 confirmed cases and 17 deaths as of Wednesday. Some models have projected that California, led by the statewide stay-at-home order, has already peaked in terms of deaths and hospitalizations from the virus.

But the peak for those who are homeless may be yet to come. In San Francisco, a national epicenter for the homeless crisis, city officials know an outbreak among more than 8,000 people living on the streets and in shelters could be devastating.

Mayor London Breed and other city officials have been preparing for this possibility — but have also faced criticism for failing to act quickly enough, and for some of their proposed actions.

After getting heat for a plan to locate homeless people at the Moscone West Convention Center, San Francisco leaders last week reversed course and ramped up efforts to move them into unused hotel rooms and other places that offer more privacy. City officials said they've managed to move about 700 vulnerable homeless people, primarily those older than 60, into hotel rooms.

"We have moved faster and further along than any other major city in the country in terms of housing our unhoused population," Breed said.

In response to the outbreak at MSC South, the city moved hundreds of men and women who are homeless into hotel space. That shelter is being cleaned and will be turned into a recovery center for homeless people who have the virus, but do not need to be hospitalized.

MSC South has space for 340 beds, but the shelter reduced its occupancy to create greater space between beds. About 125 people were at the shelter last week when the first two positive cases triggered testing for everyone there.

San Francisco's Board of Supervisors on Tuesday passed an emergency ordinance that requires the city to lease 8,250 hotel rooms by April 26, 7,500 of them for homeless people. Statewide, Gov. Gavin Newsom has launched an initiative to secure 15,000 rooms to house homeless people.

"The population of people experiencing homelessness face many barriers to health and wellness in normal times, and this pandemic will only explain and amplify those problems," Grant Colfax, director of San Francisco's public health department, said this week. "Other cities such as Boston, Los Angeles and Seattle are grappling with large numbers of cases of Covid-19 in homeless populations, and we expect to see the same."

Boston is one of the few other U.S. cities where an entire shelter population was tested, with similar widespread infections found.

At Boston's Pine Street Inn, the region's largest homeless center, 146 of the 397 people tested — or about 36 percent — were positive for the virus. As in San Francisco, most showed no signs of illness.

Health providers aren't sure what to make of the results, speculating only that they may reflect findings in the larger population showing that many people are asymptomatic. Most deaths have been among people older than 60, which is still older than the average homeless person.

Still, advocates and providers say all homeless people should be tested because of their health and social vulnerabilities and greater challenges in complying with distancing orders, despite the lack of testing nationwide.

"I believe the reason we haven't been seeing more numbers in the homeless is we haven't been able to test the people in this population. Had we been able to test, we'd probably see those numbers starting to rise," said Jim O'Connell, a physician and president of Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, which provides medical care at the city's shelters.

“This whole notion you can get away with just screening people and testing only those people with symptoms when living in congregate settings — be that shelters, prisons or nursing homes is doomed,” he said. “You have to test everybody.”

Testing among the homeless is beginning to ramp up in some parts of the state. On Tuesday, San Diego officials announced the Lucky Duck Foundation, a philanthropy, would fund Covid-19 tests for all homeless people staying at the San Diego Convention Center. The first 150 people will be tested Thursday, and 250 people are expected to be tested each day thereafter until everyone has been screened.

Margot Kushel, director of the Center for Vulnerable Populations at the University of California, San Francisco, said she wished state and local officials had moved homeless people into hotel rooms before the virus started spreading in the shelters. But she noted that efforts have ramped up to secure rooms and transfer people into spaces appropriate for quarantine.

Of San Francisco, she said city officials "are really trying their hardest to offer accommodations that allow people to tolerate quarantine — as many people as they can."

But it's not over. “It’s very, very, scary,” she said. “I think things are going to get worse before they get better.”

Aaron Leathley contributed to this report.