Coronavirus testing for all? SF supervisor demands universal testing in homeless shelters
By Marisa Kendall | Bay Area News Group | April 20, 2020

As homeless shelters around the Bay Area grapple with how to prevent future coronavirus outbreaks, a San Francisco supervisor is calling on his city to test every person living or working in a shelter, SRO or supportive housing facility.

San Francisco Supervisor Matt Haney on Monday announced a resolution he hopes will urge the Department of Public Health and Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing to provide free, on-site testing to all residents and staff. So far, San Francisco and other Bay Area cities have used a more piecemeal approach — testing people who show symptoms or have come into contact with another infected person. But, after more than 100 residents were infected with COVID-19 at San Francisco’s largest shelter, Haney said the city isn’t doing enough.

“Thousand of workers every day continue to go into work and serve some of the most vulnerable people in San Francisco,” he said during an online media briefing. “And thousands of San Franciscans continue to live in crowded shelters and congregate living sites like SROs (single-room-occupancy hotels). All of them lack something that should be easily available, which is testing.”

The Board of Supervisors will hear public comments and vote on the resolution on April 29. Haney also is asking for hazard pay for shelter workers, who he said are on the front lines of the coronavirus crisis.

After an outbreak at the MSC-South shelter infected 106 people as of Monday, including 10 staff members, homeless service providers worry there will be more outbreaks at shelters, where physical distancing is difficult to enforce, and in encampments, which are often crowded and unsanitary. They argue not enough testing has been done. But test shortages and a resulting under-reporting of positive COVID-19 cases are problems communities across the U.S. are struggling with — not just the Bay Area’s homeless.

Even so, experts argue the homeless are particularly at risk because they are more likely to be older and have other health conditions.

“This population is extremely fragile and this could be devastating,” Dr. Jason Reinking, medical director of the LifeLong Trust Clinic in Oakland, said of a potential outbreak in an encampment or shelter. “Furthermore, right now the general public needs to be invested in fighting against any reservoir of COVID disease in any sort of sub-population within our communities. And this is a prime opportunity for a reservoir of infection that we want to eliminate so it doesn’t spill over into the general population.”

LifeLong’s two county-funded street medicine teams visit encampments and test people there who report symptoms. They’ve done more than 30 tests so far, and all have been negative, Reinking said.

A medical worker with LifeLong Medical Care tests a resident of an Oakland homeless encampment for coronavirus. (Photo courtesy of LifeLong Medical Care)

In Santa Clara County, at least 35 homeless residents have tested positive for coronavirus so far — three of whom had been living at shelters,
according to a county representative. All have been housed in hotel rooms or other facilities where they can self-isolate.

The county was not immediately able to provide additional details about its efforts to test homeless residents.

Alameda County has reported fewer than 10 confirmed COVID-19 cases among its homeless population, as well as another 12 positive cases where the subject had no known address and might be homeless. As of Thursday, medical workers had tested 53 people living in Oakland’s two largest shelters — St. Vincent de Paul of Alameda County in West Oakland and Crossroads in East Oakland. All tests came back negative.

In addition to its street medicine teams, LifeLong also has set up a tent outside its clinic on 14th and Franklin streets where homeless residents can be tested. Roots Community Health Center is offering testing too, as is the James A. Watson Wellness Center in Oakland, which hopes to partner with the city to open a drive-through testing site on its parking lot.

In addition to the massive MSC-South outbreak, smaller COVID clusters have been popping up among the homeless and the people who work with them throughout the Bay Area. In San Francisco’s Mission district, two residents have tested positive at Casa Quezada — a 52-unit permanent supportive housing site for the homeless. The city’s Department of Public Health is testing all residents and staff.

At HomeFirst, which operates shelters that serve hundreds of people throughout Santa Clara County, four staff members have tested positive for coronavirus. All have since recovered and returned to work, said CEO Andrea Urton.

For staff members showing up to serve the homeless every day, work is a scary place right now, said Joe Williams, a residential case manager who works at supportive housing facilities in San Francisco.

“Every day, many workers go home to our families, including myself,” he said during Haney’s press briefing. “We don’t know if we carry the virus.”

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