Alameda County moves hundreds of homeless to hotels amid fear of coronavirus outbreak
By Sarah Ravani | SF Chronicle | April 22, 2020

After 96 people tested positive for the coronavirus at San Francisco’s largest shelter this month, alarmed Alameda County officials hurried to empty out shelters and move people into hotel rooms to prevent a similar outbreak.

Since the San Francisco outbreak on April 10, Alameda County transferred at least 346 homeless people from shelters into two Oakland hotels. But before the outbreak across the bay, the county had moved only 70 people into the hotels since mid-March, prompting criticism from homeless advocates that Alameda County acted too slowly to protect vulnerable people from the coronavirus. The state leases the two hotels for more than $1 million a month — about $186 a room per day at the Comfort Inn and the Radisson.

The county “acted with the urgency and competence that this crisis calls for,” Alameda County Supervisor Nate Miley said in a statement Wednesday, adding that rapidly housing the homeless is a “monumental task.”

Homeless advocates say the threat of the coronavirus in Alameda County shelters and tent encampments underscores the urgency to move people into hotel rooms that are empty during the pandemic. They add that the focus should go beyond those living in shelters and include people in encampments, RVs and other vehicles.

You need to enable JavaScript to run this app.

Alameda County has 8,022 homeless people — 2,172 of whom live in tents, 1,431 in cars, 1,386 in RVs and 1,239 on the streets, according to a one-night street count released last summer.

“Social distancing is not possible in an encampment where you’re sharing a bathroom and you’re sharing a space,” said Angela Shannon, a registered nurse and homeless advocate who lives in Oakland. “Is it a fraction better than all sleeping in one room? Maybe. You can’t stay in your tent 24/7. Everybody is at risk.”

In San Francisco, advocates and homeless people have called on officials to open hotel rooms for the city’s homeless. Since the outbreak two weeks ago at Multi-Service Center South, San Francisco’s largest shelter, nearly 900 people have moved into hotel rooms. More than 100, however, were first responders who work nearby.

At a time when California is under a shelter-in-place order, homeless people throughout the state are uniquely vulnerable to the coronavirus because self-quarantining is generally not an option for people who don’t have a roof over their heads.

Meanwhile, the pandemic and its economic devastation are also making it harder for cities to address chronic homelessness. San Francisco is projecting a $1.7 billion deficit due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Alameda County staff say they are working on budget projections and anticipate a deficit in the “tens of millions of dollars,” said county Supervisor Wilma Chan.

One person has tested positive for the coronavirus at Berkeley’s navigation center, Pathways STAIR Center. No other shelters have reported positive cases, but health care officials say the threat of an outbreak at an encampment is particularly concerning.
“I am so worried,” said Michael Stacey, the chief medical officer with LifeLong Medical Care, a clinic that is testing homeless people in the county. “Not only is social distancing extremely difficult, if not impossible, those individuals also have underlying medical problems and they’re already sicker than the general population.”

The county says it has fewer than 10 positive coronavirus cases among homeless people in encampments, and 11 people who tested positive who have no address.

Chan acknowledged that the process has been slow and that it is difficult to transfer people, particularly those who were coronavirus positive. Infected people each need to be transferred one by one so they don’t put others at risk in a vehicle.

“Of course, we always want to do things faster, but I think we’ve done a pretty adequate job given the order has only been in place for five weeks,” Chan said.

Chan said the county is working on identifying three more hotels — one in Berkeley and two in Oakland — to make 2,000 more hotel rooms available for the homeless.

A study released Wednesday by UC Berkeley contends that the best way to protect homeless people from the coronavirus is to place all who are willing to go into hotel rooms or other types of single-occupancy units such as apartments, regardless of whether they show symptoms of the disease.

The study, conducted at the university’s School of Public Health, supports the view of many doctors and homeless experts that it’s impossible to safely distance people from one another when they’re outside or in crowded shelters. It also suggests more vigorous testing of homeless people to pinpoint clusters before they spread.

On March 16, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced 393 hotel rooms were available in Oakland to take a portion of the county's 8,022 homeless people. The rooms at the Comfort Inn and the Radisson were added as part of the state’s Project Roomkey initiative to house homeless people, including those who test positive for the coronavirus or show symptoms.

Rooms at the Radisson, called Operation Safer Ground, are reserved for people over age 65 with an underlying medical condition. At the Comfort Inn, or Operation Comfort, rooms are set aside for people who show symptoms of the virus or test positive.

Another barrier for homeless people seeking rooms is the lack of testing available.

Over a one-month period, the LifeLong clinic administered 300 tests. But since boosting its supply this month, the clinic can conduct 100 tests per day — a “significant increase,” Stacey said.

Advocates argue that the county should provide even more hotel rooms to help keep the homeless safe.

“They should just have enough rooms for anyone who wants and needs one,” said Vera Sloan, a street outreach worker with Love and Justice in the Streets, a volunteer organization in Oakland. “The disease moves quickly. The county moves like molasses, and that is just putting people in danger.”

Life in the Bay Area has been upended by the coronavirus pandemic, as leaders have extended the shelter-in-place order through May. Tell us the questions you want answered, and the issues you think we should be investigating.

As the county continues to address the homeless crisis amid a pandemic, tensions have soared among homeless people who fear getting sick.

Delbra Taylor, 68, of Oakland lives in her vehicle and said she hasn’t been able to get a hotel room. Gaining access to restrooms and handwashing stations is difficult, she said.

“We are out here, and everybody is ignoring us. It’s not fair,” Taylor said. “There is nothing to protect me. How can we be protected if we are being left out?”

To read the original article: https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Alameda-County-moves-hundreds-of-homeless-to-15219680.php