

Wider testing cornerstone of easing stay-at-home

LA offers tests to all... Still has unused kits

LOS ANGELES, May 18, (AP) — With ample coronavirus tests and not enough sick people seeking them, the mayor of Los Angeles recently did something on a scale no other major US city had done — allow anyone with or without symptoms to be tested as often as they want.

A website to book a test was quickly swamped by residents in the nation's second-largest city and the surrounding county who couldn't get tested under more stringent guidelines and were concerned they were infected or could be asymptomatic carriers unwittingly exposing others.

But despite overbooking to compensate for a third of the people who didn't show up, the city still has thousands of tests that aren't being used each week, according to figures provided to The Associated Press by the mayor's office.

"Wasted tests at a time when we still have insufficient testing is really unfortunate," said Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, a San Diego-based medical research partnership. "I applaud what they're

doing. The more people tested the better."

Mayor Eric Garcetti's vow to not let a test go to waste was the result of a partnership with a start-up company that developed an easy-to-administer test that doesn't rely on scarce supplies. But it was a significant departure from stricter state criteria and guidelines set by the health department the city shares with the county to limit tests to those who need them most.

Ease

It comes at a time when expanded testing is a cornerstone of the state's plan to ease its stay-at-home order and as Los Angeles County has become the epicenter of the virus outbreak and lags progress the rest of the state has shown.

While the virus was initially worse in Northern California, LA County, home to a quarter of the state's nearly 40 million residents, now accounts for more than half the state's deaths and a case count growing more rapidly than other major state counties. A large nursing home population, accounting for about half the county's deaths, and densely housed poor peo-

ple are two main reasons.

When Garcetti opened up testing April 30, the county at large had relaxed some guidelines on who could get a test, with priorities going to the sickest and most vulnerable. It allowed testing some people without symptoms, including health care workers and emergency personnel most at risk of exposure.

From a public health perspective, wider testing could help determine the disease prevalence, though that would require random sampling, not people seeking to be tested, said Karin Michels, an epidemiology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. And testing asymptomatic people comes at the expense of those who can't get a test.

"In a perfect world, you want to test the whole state, you want to test the whole country," Michels said. "We don't have enough test kits for everybody right now." As the mayor removed limits on who could get tested, appointments filled up.

"I was stunned," said Sarah Wolf, who reserved a slot online after receiving a text alert. "There are people on the East

Coast I know who can't get tested."

Offer

Los Angeles was not the first big city to offer free tests for everyone. Houston had done so nearly two weeks earlier but on a much smaller scale of 500 to 1,000 tests a day.

LA has paid \$137 per test to Curative-Korva, a start-up run by Fred Turner, a 25-year-old British wunderkind. The firm was making sepsis tests when a worker there thought he was infected with coronavirus, couldn't get a test and devised one to collect a specimen by swabbing the inside of the mouth after coughing, spokesman Kyle Artega said.

The test got emergency approval from the Food and Drug Administration.

Los Angeles has 75,000 tests available each week to use mainly at eight drive-thru sites open six days a week, though it also tests at homeless shelters, nursing homes and recreation centers. It has conducted a weekly average of close to 57,000 tests in the two weeks since the mayor expanded testing.

Stay connected

Chats chip away at virus isolation

DALLAS, May 18, (AP) — For 81-year-old Dell Kaplan, the offer to get calls from a stranger just to chat while staying home during the coronavirus pandemic was immediately appealing.

"It gets pretty lonely here by yourself," said Kaplan, a suburban Dallas resident who has been missing meals out with friends, family get-togethers and going to classes at a nearby college.

The program being offered by the city of Plano is among those that have popped up across the US during the pandemic to help older adults with a simple offer to engage in small talk.

"It's really just to give them a social outlet that they might not have otherwise," said Holly Ryckman, a library support supervisor who is among about 15 staffers from several city departments in Plano who together have been making about 50 calls a week starting in April.

Brent Bloechle, a library manager who helped organize the program, said the city plans to keep it up through at least mid-summer, and maybe permanently.

The people receiving the calls have various amounts of social interaction in their lives, Ryckman said. Many, she said, talk about relatives who are in touch, so her call might be just be "one piece of the puzzle" helping them stay engaged.

That's the case for Kaplan, who regularly talks with her daughter, granddaughters and friends, keeps up with people on Facebook and has been

participating online in her adult-learning classes.

But Kaplan said her biweekly chats with Ryckman give her something to look forward to "besides the usual."

Laurie Onofrio-Collier has been making calls to older people across the US from her California home as part of the AARP's Friendly Voices program. Onofrio-Collier said her goal is for each person she calls "to feel uplifted, to feel good."

Like the Plano program, the volunteers for the Friendly Voices program guide people to resources if they need help from local groups for things like getting groceries - AARP's Community Connections site lists groups across the US offering help - but the main point is conversation.

Onofrio-Collier said some people she has called live with a spouse, while others live alone.

She said conversations touch on everything from hobbies to vacations to happy memories.

Onofrio-Collier bonded with one caller over a shared experience: "We ended up talking about how ... when we were kids we loved to read so much that we would read under the covers with a flashlight."

"I get off the phone with a smile," Onofrio-Collier said.

She is among about 1,000 volunteers making the calls, according to Andy Miller, senior vice president of AARP Innovations Labs.

Miller said some people want help with technology so they can stay connected with their grandchildren. One volunteer helped a woman figure out how to play online checkers with her grandchild.

"We're seeing a lot of that - where people are just trying to stay connected to family in ways that they probably didn't do before," Miller said.

Older adults are among those who are particularly vulnerable to severe illness and death from the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. That's why health officials are encouraging people over 65 to stay home even as some states loosen restrictions put in place because of the pandemic. For most people, the virus causes mild or moderate symptoms, and the vast majority recover within a few weeks.

"Some seniors may be the last ones out because of the vulnerability," Miller said.

Kaplan, who retired 11 years ago after more than two decades managing Plano's senior center, said she and Ryckman didn't know each other, but found common ground in talking about the city and dealing with isolating at home.

Ryckman said the calls have been "a gift" for her.

Kaplan said that when she feels it's safe for her to venture to places other than the grocery store, she plans to visit the library and meet Ryckman in person.



Ryckman



Kaplan



In this May 8, 2020 photo, Ryoki Ono, head priest, performs a livestream prayer during a 10-day trial of 'online shrine' visit program at Ooterusaki Shrine in downtown Tokyo, allowing its visitors to join rituals from their homes. (AP)

Shrine offers solace

Shinto shrines, a go-to place for many Japanese to pray for good health and safety, have largely shuttered during the coronavirus pandemic. But one Tokyo shrine went online for those seeking solace.

Ooterusaki Shrine in downtown Tokyo was livestreaming prayers on Twitter during a May 1-10 holiday, allowing those stuck at home to join rituals. The shrine also accepted worshippers' messages, which were printed on a virtual wooden tablet.

"I thought about how people can pray and have a peace of mind at a time everyone is feeling uneasy about all the news and going through major changes in their life but still cannot go out to pray," head priest Ryoki Ono said. "The idea is to provide a chance for people to pray from home."

For Machi Zama, a freelance writer, that's just what she needed. Zama prayed for her friend

who recently had surgery, and everyone else experiencing difficult times, as well as for an early end to the global pandemic.

Watching the priests perform the purification rites, she felt as if she was at the shrine, Zama said. When one of the priests faced the screen and waved a religious paper streamer, she would bow. It was like her prayers were answered, she said.

"Wherever you are, I think it's your feelings and thoughts, the wish to pray, that's what's important," Zama said. "Whether online or offline, I don't think it matters."

For Ono, praying in the sacred shrine is still better. He said he hoped people will visit the shrine for a real experience when it reopens. The shrine ended the online prayers last Sunday to prepare for its upcoming annual festival. (AP)

Fear, misinformation have devastating effects

Medics face hostility over coronavirus stigma

CAIRO, May 18, (AP) — Dr. Dina Abdel-Salam watched in terror last month as scores of strangers gathered under the balcony of her aunt's empty apartment in the Egyptian city of Ismailia, where she'd temporarily sheltered after leaving her elderly parents at home to protect them from exposure to the coronavirus.

The crowd called out her name, hurling threats until she dialed the police for help.

"You have moved here to make us sick," someone shouted.

Abdel-Salam's ordeal is just one of many in a wave of assaults on doctors, illustrating how public fear and rage can turn against the very people risking their lives to save patients in the pandemic.

While many cities across the world erupt at sundown with collective cheers to thank front-line workers treating COVID-19 patients, in Egypt, India, the Philippines, Mexico and elsewhere, some doctors and nurses have come under attack, intimidated and treated like pariahs because of their work.

The pandemic, especially in places with limited healthcare infrastructure, has already subjected doctors to hardships. But medical workers, seen as possible sources of contagion, face another staggering challenge in these countries: the stigma associated with the illness.

"Now more than ever, we need to recognize the importance of investing in our health workforce and take concrete actions that guarantee their well-being and safety," Ahmed al-Mandhari, the World Health Organization's regional director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said in a virtual news conference earlier this week. But in many places, that's a difficult task as mistrust, fear and misinformation can have devastating effects. Decades of poor education and scant government services in some places have created deep misgivings about the medical profession.

In central India, a group of five health workers, dressed in full protective suits, entered a neighborhood to quarantine contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 patient when a mob descended, slinging stones and screaming insults.

"Some people felt that the doctors and nurses will come and take their blood," said Laxmi Narayan Sharma, the health union president in Madhya Pradesh, in central India.

In the southern Indian city of Chennai, another stone-throwing mob broke up a funeral for Simon Hercules, a neurologist who died from COVID-19, pelting the ambulance carrying his remains and forcing his family and friends to run for their lives.

In Afghanistan, conspiracy theories undermine the credibility of medical professionals. Nearly 19 years after the US-led coalition defeated the Taliban, many blame Western nations for the country's deterioration. One commonly shared conspiracy theory is that the virus was allegedly manufactured by the US and China to reduce the world population, said SayedMassiNoori, a doctor at one of two Kabul hospitals testing for coronavirus.

Last week, several physicians at the emergency unit of the Afghan Japan Hospital, where Noori works, were mobbed by 15 family members of a patient who died of the virus. The doctors had their noses bloodied.

"The relatives believe it is the doctors who killed their family members," Noori said.

The coronavirus hotline in Ouagadougou, the capital of war-torn Burkina Faso, fields calls about persistent coughs and headaches. But it has also gotten death threats.

"They call and say that after they're finished killing the soldiers in the north, they're going to come and kill everyone here," said

ROME, May 18, (Agencies): Italy, one of the European nations hardest hit by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), remained upbeat on Sunday due to downward tilting of the curve signaling infections rates with the germ.

The Civil Protection Department said in its daily report that overall infection cases dropped by 1,836 cases to reach 6,851 in past 24 hours. Number of patients at intensive care wards dropped by 13 to 762. Likewise, clinical cases by 89 to 10,311.

The number of cases at house quarantine declined by 1,734 to 57,278, against increase among recovery cases, rising by 2,366 to total 125,176.

The department recorded 145 deaths in past 24 hours -- lowest since eve of enforcing containment measures on March 9 -- raising the whole figure of the recuperated to 31,908.

Italy's tally of infections now stands at 225,435. Italian authorities, after imposing a two month stringent lockdown, launched a gradual phase for easing the constraints, themed "coexisting with the virus," effective May 4.

Meanwhile New York City residents who flouted social distancing restrictions for a night on the town got the mayor's wrath Sunday. The city's embattled health commissioner is staying on the job. Gov. Andrew Cuomo played the part of a model patient, getting swabbed for coronavirus on live TV as he announced all people experiencing flu-like symptoms are now eligible for testing.

Now, two more state regions - Western New York and the Capital District - have met criteria to move into the first phase of reopening but still need to hire several hundred more people for contact tracing programs.

Red Cross volunteer Emmanuel Drabo. Health workers across the Philippines have been attacked and targeted more than 100 times since mid-March, resulting in 39 arrests, police Lt. Gen. Guillermo Eleazar told The Associated Press.

In one attack, five men stopped a nurse heading to work in the Sultan Kudarat province in late March, throwing liquid bleach into his face and burning his eyes.

Tough-talking President Rodrigo Duterte, long censured for his violent approach to curbing crime, responded: "I told the police, maybe it's illegal but I'll answer for it. Pour it back on the attackers of doctors and nurses."

In Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city, doctors and nurses say just venturing out in scrubs invites danger. One city hospital instructed its workers to shed their uniforms when they clock out, and the government has assigned National Guard troops to public hospitals.

Similar fears have sparked arrests in Sudan. In Omdurman,

In the first phase, construction, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, manufacturing and wholesale trade businesses are allowed to reopen and retail stores can provide curbside or in-store pickup or drop-off.

Here are the latest coronavirus-related developments in New York: New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio admonished people seen crowding outside bars Saturday night - many with drinks in hand but no masks on their faces - for putting lives in danger. Officials may shut down establishments that break distancing rules, de Blasio said.

City bars and restaurants have been restricted to takeout and delivery since mid-March, when coronavirus cases started to soar, but some in Manhattan were allowing people to dine and drink inside on Saturday.

"We're not going to tolerate people starting to congregate. It's as simple as that," de Blasio said. "If we have to shut places down, we will."

After a rash of violent social distancing arrests involving people of color, the city this week eased distancing enforcement by no longer having police break up small groups of people or confront citizens failing to wear a mask.

As the weather heats up, though, more and more New Yorkers are flocking to public spaces and familiar haunts for a sense of normalcy after spending most of the last two months cooped up inside - and not always policing themselves.

Parks, boardwalks and beaches attracted big crowds on Saturday, though city beaches aren't officially open and won't be for Memorial Day weekend.

Other beaches in the region will be open for the holiday, but de Blasio said opening the city's strands "is not the right thing to do in the epicenter of this crisis."

NY widens testing eligibility

Italy coexists well with COVID-19

across the Nile River from the capital, Khartoum, a riot erupted at a hospital when rumor spread it would take COVID-19 patients. Police arrested several people who tried to attack the building, said hospital director Babaker Youssef.

In Egypt, even hospital administrators have faced public anger. Ahmed Abbas, the vice president of a government hospital in Egypt's Nile Delta city of Zagazig, was wearing scrubs when he was jostled and cursed while waiting in line at an ATM. The head of Egypt's Doctors' Union, Ihab el-Taheer, says such incidents are "limited" but still disheartening.

On top of a global shortage of respirators, virus testing, and protective equipment, increased public hostility has deprived some medical professionals of basic needs — such as housing and transportation.

In India's capital, New Delhi, doctors and first responders reported being evicted by their landlords. A nurse in Ethiopia said taxis refuse to pick up workers coming out of the nation's main hospital dedicated to coronavirus patients.

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