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SF brings testing to Chinatown SRO to try to prevent outbreaks at crowded hotels

By Anna Bauman



The Chinese Hospital gave free coronavirus tests to all residents in a single-room-occupancy hotel in San Francisco's Chinatown on Friday to try to prevent another widespread outbreak in these densely packed buildings. Cases have soared among the many vulnerable, elderly people living in these residential hotels elsewhere in the city where tight quarters and communal spaces make it especially easy for the virus to spread.

On Friday, those living at a residential hotel on Waverly Place walked down narrow stairs and onto the sunny Chinatown street where a pop-up tent and team of gowned nurses waited.

Temperature check, two squirts of hand sanitizer. Each single-room-occupancy hotel resident sat on a folding chair, lowered their mask and tilted their head back. A poke from a long thin swab in each nostril — some winced, others coughed, a little girl cried — and then it was done.

Thirty-four residents of the Ning Yung SRO on Waverly Place were tested for the coronavirus on Friday afternoon through a pilot program spearheaded by the Chinese Hospital, a nonprofit community hospital, and supported by the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

The city's Board of Supervisors this week passed an emergency ordinance calling on the health department to follow specific protocols on testing, contact tracing and reporting cases at SROs.

The legislation, sponsored by Supervisor Aaron Peskin, came as cases among residents and staff at residential hotels have soared 1,888% since April 1. There were 179 cases as of Monday.

"We should not be resting on our laurels," Peskin said, adding that he is worried about a second wave of the coronavirus if people become complacent. "This is only the beginning. Testing some 30 people in one SRO is not going to yield the information and results and the safety."

A child is being consoled as she is brought to a COVID-19 coronavirus testing site for residents of Hoy Sun Ning Yung Benevolent Association on Chinatown's Waverly Place in San Francisco, Calif. on Friday, May 22, 2020. Stephen Lam / Special to The Chronicle

Still, Gina Yam, the hospital's director of operations, said the testing was smooth as her team wiped and sanitized and peeled off gloves after testing for roughly an hour. "I think it's a great start," she said. "We are hoping that all results are negative."

The program will test and track each resident, providing contact tracing, follow-up testing, and additional support and medical care as needed, Yam said.

Testing was voluntary, but nearly all residents chose to be tested. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, which runs the SRO and has an office in the same building, helped educate residents about the program. None of them had symptoms when screened before the tests, Yam said.

Jian Zhang, CEO of Chinese Hospital, said the goal is to expand the program to other SROs, but there are no firm plans yet. The program is labor-intensive, and limited resources remain an issue, she said.

"This is just the first one," Zhang said. "We're figuring out how to do more."

Another obstacle is that some residents are afraid to be tested because they fear it could mean separation from their family, loss of work or stigmatization, Zhang said.

Dr. Sunny Pak, director of Chinatown Public Health Center, said the city's health department is committed to working with community groups to offer appropriate, culturally sensitive medical care in native languages to immigrant and SRO communities.

Upstairs at the Ning Yung building, two floors each have a dozen rooms, some with multiple people. The residents, many of them seniors, share three toilets, two showers and a kitchen with one sink and one stove top per floor. Cloth sheets substitute for doors on many rooms. On Friday, a man turned on the shower to wash clothes in a plastic tub.

Chinatown has yet to be hit by a large outbreak of the coronavirus, but members of the Chinese Hospital and other community groups say complacency is not an option — the pandemic is not over.

"Being one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the United States, San Francisco Chinatown is at an extremely high risk of a devastating community outbreak," Zhang said.