These HIV Workers Now Fight COVID-19

Staff at San Francisco AIDS Foundation found that many skills, such as delivering HIV test results, translated well.

September 4, 2020 By Trent Straube

More than 20 staff members at San Francisco AIDS Foundation are now responding to the city's COVID-19 crisis. The transition makes sense, considering that the city's health department developed many of the relevant protocols and methods by tackling the HIV epidemic these past 40 years.

What's more, employees from the AIDS foundation's Latino programs who speak Spanish have been particularly useful because the coronavirus is disproportionately affecting the city's Latino community, many of whom don't speak English. In fact, the California Department of Public Health reports that as of early September, Latinos represent about 60% of COVID-19 cases and almost 50% of COVID-19 deaths.

According to a San Francisco AIDS Foundation blog post titled "SFAF Staff Pivot to COVID-19 Response," their staff members completed training sessions and are now involved in four main areas of the COVID-19 response:

- Case Investigation, which entails reaching out to people who test positive for COVID-19 (sometimes delivering those test results to them) and then connecting them with care and support services while guiding them on the best ways to quarantine.

- Contact Tracing, which involves connecting with people who have had close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19 and then encouraging them to get tested and quarantine.

- Isolation and Quarantine Support, which helps fulfill the needs of people who are in isolation;

this could include supplying medicines or food or other essential items.

- Outreach in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotels, which involves connecting with those living in these close-quarters residential settings, then building trust with them (many don't speak English) and assessing their needs. It's an important element in the city's COVID-19 response because outbreaks have occurred in SRO hotels.

Aureliano Davila-Valente of SFAF provided case investigation in Spanish. "It has really opened my eyes to a lot of needs in the community," they said in the blog post. "I'm speaking with people who don't have stable housing, or who are living in crowded living situations that make it difficult to follow social isolation guidelines. They may be working in jobs that don't have good workplace protections—they aren't provided masks or other personal protective equipment at work, or can't take time off if they have symptoms. It's difficult, but it's good to be able to offer financial assistance, food, a place to quarantine and other resources doing this work."

Jeremy Zondlo is another AIDS foundation staff member now engaged in the city's COVID-19 response. In fact, he oversees the foundation's COVID-19 team. He said the staff is well-equipped for the challenges of the pandemic—notably, delivering positive test results and building trust.

"People want to get tested in their community and then be connected to relatable, trustworthy counselors or support staff who can help people navigate aspects of care and disclosure," Zondlo said. "It's so inspiring to see all the ways that our staff can pivot to help people who have already tested positive for COVID-19 and people who may have been exposed."

In similar news, HIV groups in New York have responded to the new pandemic in unique ways. Read "HIV Nonprofit Housing Works Opens COVID-19 Homeless Shelters."

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