

California communities begin paying coronavirus patients to stay home from work

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OAKLAND — California communities are trying a new approach with low-wage workers who test positive for Covid-19: pay them to stay home.

San Francisco pioneered the concept last month with its Right to Recover program, which provides the equivalent of two weeks' pay to residents in need who test positive. Across the bay, Alameda County supervisors this week unanimously agreed to try a similar program in five hard-hit regions. And the city of Los Angeles is set to consider a \$25 million wage replacement program for workers who test positive for the virus.

To Los Angeles Council member David Ryu, wage relief is simply a matter of public health. The more people who continue to work while infected, the more coronavirus will spread in the community.

“Most of our essential workers are low income, they’re immigrants and they are disproportionately affected by Covid,” said Ryu, who introduced the [motion](#) last week. “Part of that is because they have to put food on the table.”

San Francisco’s program began after [a University of California, San Francisco study](#) of nearly 3,000 residents in the city’s Mission District showed 95 percent of those tested in late April were Hispanic or Latinx — with 90 percent saying they’re unable to work from home.

“As the supervisor of the district, I asked the question: What can I do to react with policy to these shocking results? We collectively in the group came up with this idea,” said San Francisco Supervisor Hillary Ronen. She said she worked with the city’s Latino Task Force and public health officials to come up with the plan.

Latinos across California have been hit disproportionately by the pandemic, representing 58 percent of the cases but only 39 percent of the population. Many are reluctant to get tested because they can’t stop working to quarantine and still make ends meet. Many lack access to or information about benefits such as unemployment, sick pay or other assistance programs.

The state has stepped in to provide some relief to workers during the pandemic. Gov. Gavin Newsom signed an [executive order](#) to provide two weeks paid sick leave to workers from large employers — over 500 — in the agriculture and food industry who have been impacted by the pandemic, and has provided [temporary hotel housing](#) for agricultural workers who need to isolate. He hopes to extend that help to more essential workers.

Backers of the new, local programs say their efforts fill a gap by encouraging more workers, especially those who may be reluctant to seek help due to their immigration status, to get tested by offering them assistance during isolation. They also connect them to necessary services like food delivery. The programs also can provide aid to those who work for small employers or are self-employed, such as day laborers or gardeners.

San Francisco's Right to Recover program is funded through [Give2SF](#), an online donation program created by the city in 2011. Ronen said relying on a nonprofit was faster than funding it through the city with legislation, but she's already working to seek additional funding beyond the initial \$2 million tranche.

The program provides \$1,285.80 payments to residents, the equivalent of two weeks' pay at San Francisco's minimum wage. It is expected to run out of money within the next month.

So far, the program has provided grants for 867 San Franciscans. It doesn't require people to provide income verification or prove that they're in need, but they can't apply directly. They have to be contacted by the San Francisco Department of Public Health after testing positive, and are then asked if they need financial support in order to stay home from work and quarantine.

If they say yes, they are referred to one of three local organizations — Mission Economic Development Agency, Young Community Developers or Self-Help for the Elderly in Chinatown — which administer the funds.

“People have really welcomed the program,” said Carlos Martinez, director of asset building programs at the Mission agency. “For many of these patients ... if it wasn't because of this program, they would be out on the street looking for a job and trying to feed their families. This helps them to actually isolate themselves for a couple of weeks.”

Alameda County's pilot program, unanimously approved Tuesday by county supervisors, offers a lump sum of \$1,250 to people in four Oakland neighborhoods and one in nearby Hayward.

“If people are able to socially isolate for those two weeks, it will help stop the spread of the virus,” Supervisor Wilma Chan said. “If we have hundreds of people out there working when they're sick, it's going to multiply exponentially.”

The details are still being worked out, but Alameda's \$10 million pilot project is expected to cover up to 7,500 people. Chan said she'd like to expand it beyond the pilot neighborhoods, but wants to first see how well it works out.

Los Angeles' program is still in the development stages, but the city council could approve it by the end of August. Ryu said it would rely primarily on the city's federal coronavirus relief funds.

In San Francisco, Ronen is also working on what she considers the other important piece of helping people who are unable to work due to the virus: job protection.

Ronen is spearheading an emergency ordinance that would prevent employers from firing, demoting or in any manner discriminating against workers who test positive and need time off or are quarantining due to an exposure.