

LESSONS LEARNED: Planning & Implementing a Vaccine Strategy For People Experiencing Homelessness



Vaccinate ALL 58

Together we can end the pandemic.

On March 11, 2021, the California Department of Public Health issued [guidance on vaccination eligibility](#) that includes vaccination for individuals who live or work in congregate residential settings, including homeless shelters, as well as all people experiencing homelessness, regardless of age, as they may transition into congregate settings at short notice.

Communities across California have been working to roll out COVID-19 vaccination, including developing strategies to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness. During February and March, some California communities held targeted events or pilots for sheltered or service-connected people eligible under the previous tiers. Here are some of the key lessons from those efforts and two spotlighted communities.

1. Collaboration continues to be critical

Vaccine has been distributed to variety of health care organizations including large providers, pharmacies, community health centers, and public health departments. Getting vaccine to people experiencing homelessness will require partnership between homelessness providers, Continuums of Care, and one or more health care providers. Use these links to identify possible partners including [Health Care for the Homeless programs](#), [Community Health Centers](#), [Mobile Clinics](#), [Tribal Health Programs](#), and local [Public Health Departments](#).





2. Coordinated Preparation is Essential

Coordinating a united, ongoing approach to reach people experiencing homelessness, or even just a single targeted event, takes significant preparation. Prep work includes:

Advance outreach and education

Begin well in advance with outreach and education to people experiencing homelessness from trusted messengers who are representative of the community experiencing homelessness. [See [Vaccine Preparation Checklist](#) for more information.]

Plan the Logistics

Every shelter or service site will be different, but all must accommodate the steps in the process, the flow of patients, and ability to preserve distancing. An advance site visit and joint [site plan](#) may be critical.

Clarify roles and commitments

Each event requires several roles including symptom screeners, registration, clinical screening for vaccine, vaccination, and observation. Additional roles may be to help with paperwork, provide food or incentives, or be available to answer questions.

Make sure everyone is clear on their role, trained for it, and committed to staying the whole time they commit to. Have trusted and trained people on site who can answer questions. *Be sure to have someone specifically designated to handle unexpected situations that arise to ensure any disruptions do not stop the patient flow.*

3. Learn and Iterate

To save lives and protect people experiencing homelessness, vaccination will be a central focus of our work for the foreseeable future. Additional learnings will emerge as efforts roll out and new partnerships develop. Debrief events with all partners and refine plans accordingly. Review data to ensure the efforts are meeting their objectives and achieving equity goals. Include people with lived experience in your debriefs and future planning.

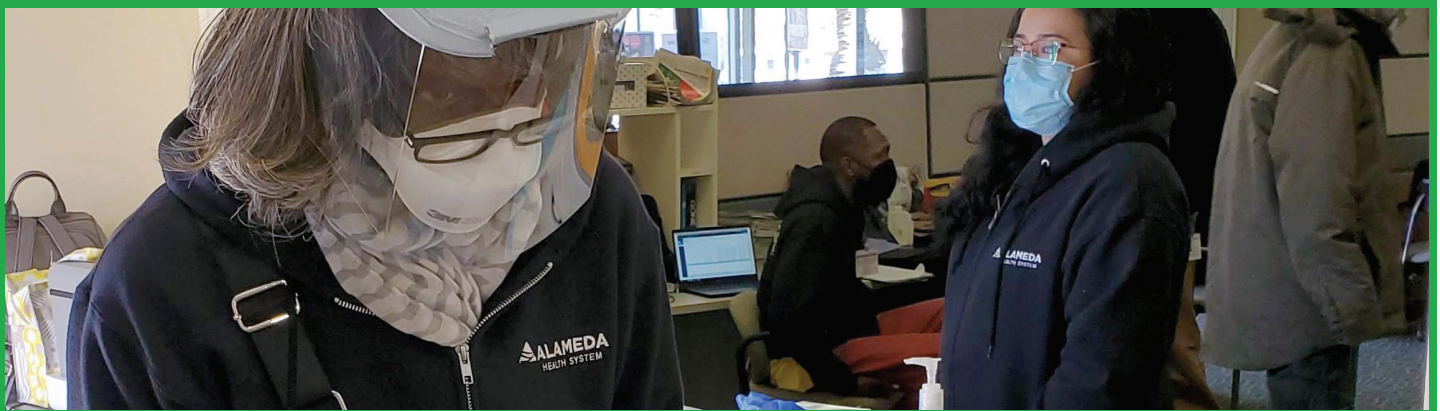
About this series

The State of California Homelessness Coordinating and Financing Council, the California Health Care Foundation, and the Benioff Housing and Homelessness Initiative at UCSF have joined together to create a series of resources to help homelessness response system leaders and providers to prepare and implement a strategy for vaccinating homelessness service staff and volunteers and people experiencing homelessness in every California county and community.



UCSF Center for Vulnerable Populations
Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital
Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative





SPOTLIGHT: Alameda County System planning through a pilot approach

In preparation for wider rollout when more vaccine becomes available and tiers change, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency launched a shelter vaccination pilot in early March. The County surveyed all of the area's shelters about their capacity, current census, guest profile, and whether they had been the site of any COVID-19 outbreaks. From the information gathered, they chose three shelters with significant numbers of guests over 65 and the greatest number of prior outbreaks to pilot their shelter vaccination efforts.

The pilot at the largest shelter was done in partnership with a local pharmacy. The Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) program made arrangements with the shelter provider and developed the logistical plan. They prepared a [checklist](#) to help shelters prepare, including designating roles for shelter staff to support the event. HCH and shelter workers staffed the registration, symptom check, and documentation stations, and pharmacy staff came to the site to deliver the injections. HCH worked in advance and at the event to remove barriers for people without an insurance card or ID, getting coverage confirmed and assisting with self-attestation if documents were not available. While no one is required to pay for vaccination, pharmacies are reimbursed based on people's insurance coverage. To ensure good partnership, HCH committed to continuing to support this documentation work after the event if the pharmacy cannot later confirm coverage. The County is also working so that in the future they can be the "payer of last resort" to avoid any problems based on not having this information on every person.

Through these pilots, the County and its partners learned to be very clear with shelter staff about who an event is for, so as not to disappoint people who come thinking it is a public event. They also learned to be clear about the roles and time commitments for everyone – for example, people doing symptom checks need to be present the whole time or it slows down the process. Likewise, it is critical to have someone at the site who can handle anything that comes up, whether vaccine related or not, so that the patient flow is not disrupted. They plan to station their most skilled outreach workers with mental health first aid training at every large event. Finally, they learned that enthusiasm among shelter staff for vaccination translated into more folks at the site participating. This affirmed the need to continue to train and support site champions.

Over the course of March, the County and its partners will roll out many more shelter events, continuing to work in partnership as needed to provide the vaccine and person power to cover the need. The County plans to reach 36 different locations in March, through geographic clusters, reaching 2-3 sites per day. A monthly calendar is being developed to let the community know where the teams will be and when.

 [Shelter Provider Checklist for COVID-19 Vaccination Events](#)



Spotlight: San Diego County Coordinating a Targeted Event



Before rolling out its efforts, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency conducted a broad survey of attitudes and responses to the COVID-19 vaccine, which included approximately 100 people experiencing homelessness. They found that people experiencing homelessness were generally interested in or willing to consider getting vaccinated, and that the most important things to them in making their decisions were 1) a trusted provider and 2) a place to get vaccinated that worked for them.

Father Joe's Villages is a large homeless services provider in San Diego that provides shelter and housing to approximately 2,500 people experiencing homelessness each night. They partnered with the County and Champions for Health (formerly the San Diego County Medical Society Foundation) to hold an event February 11th at their regular public lunch program for both residents of their shelters and people unsheltered in the surrounding area. The meal program serves up to 500 people daily.

Working with Champions for Health to prepare, they knew they had 200 doses available for the day. The team scheduled advance appointments for 50 people, half of them staff and volunteers and half people experiencing homelessness. They wanted to reserve significant capacity for people to decide to participate on the day of the event.

At the lunch, people waiting saw others getting the vaccine. Members of the Father Joe's team talked to eligible people in line for lunch to let them know they could get vaccinated right away and answered questions. Interpretation and Spanish-language speakers were made available. Another 110 people who were eligible based on age chose to get vaccinated. Staff and volunteers helped with registration, completing forms, and also offered participants their choice of thank you gifts which included masks and hygiene kits, snacks, socks, and knit caps. Finally, with 40 doses left at the end of the event and not wanting any vaccine to go to waste, other frontline staff were called and offered shots as well as vulnerable people living in their shelters.

On March 11, the team went back to the same site to give second shots to those who had received the first shot at the prior event and offer vaccination to others for the first time. Focused outreach and reminders occurred before the event and most people who had received their first dose returned for the second. A smaller portion did not return and will require additional follow up. Newly vaccinated individuals were given the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which the team expects will be their future practice as long as that option is available.