San Francisco Makes Progress in Treating Hep C Among Homeless People

The city has focused its efforts on mobile outreach.

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Diagnosing and treating homeless people for hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a challenge for health workers in cities across the country. But one city in particular, San Francisco, has seen major success in its efforts to help its at-risk homeless community, reports SF Weekly.

According to the San Francisco Department of Public Health, mobile outreach has had a major impact on the city's homeless population. Until a few years ago, the city required people to get a referral to a liver disease specialist for diagnosis, testing and treatment.

But local health officials say homeless people are now being diagnosed, treated and cured at unprecedented rates. One reason is that hepatitis C treatment has become so much more effective, tolerable and easier to access over the last few years. What's more, new therapies can now be prescribed by primary care providers, and just one pill a day can cure the virus in as little as eight weeks.

Another factor that has helped boost diagnosis and treatment rates among this population is the deployment of a state-of-the art mobile hepatitis C clinic by the University of California at San Francisco. The truck offers rapid 20-minute testing on the spot and is equipped with a FibroScan, a machine that can track the effects of the virus on the liver.

Since its debut in January, the mobile clinic has done more than 420 screenings on people and 140 FibroScan tests. Among those individuals seen, 25% said they lived outdoors or in their car, 15% lived in shelters and 20% lived in a single-room occupancy or short-term hotel. Of the 420 people who were screened, more than 30% tested positive for hepatitis C.

Additionally, San Francisco's Sixth Street Harm Reduction Center, which is operated by the AIDS Foundation, opened up 36 lockers from which participants in its hepatitis C treatment program can pick up medications, including refills when needed, making keeping up with HCV treatment that much easier.

The city hopes to continue focusing on at-risk communities in its effort to eliminate hepatitis C across San Francisco.

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