

HEALTH

Undetected: Lack of access to testing among minorities keeps virus alive

Data on the racial and economic background of who is and isn't getting tested in Florida is scarce.



From Left members of the South St. Pete Community Response COVID-19 coalition, Michele Rayner-Goolsby, Meriem Ziad (cq), Carla Bristol, Erick Atwater and Jabaar Edmond volunteer time to coordinate distribution of Covid-19 care packages free to the community in front of Atwater's restaurant on Thursday April, 9th in St. Petersburg. Atwater's has been the central hub of donations from . The group has been successful for galvanizing a robust community relief effort for local residents of South St. Petersburg. Donations for relief efforts can be directed to Community Development And Training Center at cdatcenter.webs.com [Times]

FORT LAUDERDALE — At the Caridad Center in Boynton Beach, one of the largest free health clinics in Florida, a young woman with a white mask approaches a car waiting in the coronavirus testing line. As the clinic worker swabs each of the six people inside, they explain they work as house cleaners, and sometimes, the owners are ill. When they heard on Spanish radio that free testing was available nearby, they came, wanting to know if they are infected.

By the end of the day, 178 people who arrive by car or by foot are swabbed at the Caridad Center. And, when results come back, 12% are positive, double Palm Beach County's average that week of 5.4%.

"This underscores the need for testing in all parts of the community," said Dr. Oneka Marriott, chief medical officer for FoundCare, the Palm Beach County community health foundation that operates the site.

Doctors, public health workers, activists, and leaders in South Florida's black and brown minority communities warn of a gap in surveillance in these groups. And as coronavirus spreads from house cleaner to landscaper to grocery clerk, its undetected chains of transmission are like the embers of a forest fire, keeping the outbreak going, and potentially sparking the next wave of infections.

Data on the racial and economic background of who is and isn't getting tested in Florida is scarce. The state has not reported the racial or ethnic makeup of persons tested. Nor does it report the ZIP codes where few or none have been tested. Instead, the Florida Department of Health reports only positive results by zip code, making it difficult to determine whether historically marginalized black and brown communities are receiving adequate testing.

"We're in a pandemic," Dr. Sharrelle Barber, a social epidemiologist and faculty in the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at Drexel University, said during a SciLine briefing on health disparities and COVID-19. "The extent to which we don't control the virus in these populations is the extent to which we don't control it at all."

The deadly coronavirus does not respect barriers of race and class. It can easily jump from a nail technician, restaurant server, or grocery clerk who can't afford to stop working, to a wealthy suburbanite who has been scrupulous about social distancing. Likewise, the house cleaners tested by FoundCare may have been exposed in the homes they cleaned.

That means even though Florida has significantly expanded testing capacity, who gets tested is just as important as how many tests are completed, since inequities in testing jeopardize everyone. The state in recent weeks has begun to establish walk-up testing sites in poorer communities where many residents may not have adequate health care, much less a car to drive to a testing site.

"That's why the strategy around walk-up sites," Florida's Lt. Gov. Jeanette Nunez said. "It's why going into those communities and partnering with folks they trust is so important."

The state has managed to test about half a million people for coronavirus, or about one out of every 42 Floridians. Governor Ron DeSantis says he plans to keep expanding testing to reach more of the 21 million people who live on the peninsula, but it's been a slow climb — the weekly average number of people the state tests per day for the last two weeks is 16,212.

Statewide, about 7.6% of people tested have been infected. That rate is higher in South Florida, where about 9% of people tested have been infected in Palm Beach and Broward counties, and close to 13% have tested positive in Miami-Dade.

When community health organizations venture out to test minority groups, they say they are discovering higher infection rates.

FoundCare in partnership with the Guatemalan Maya Center recently opened a pop-up testing site for coronavirus in a church parking lot in Lake Worth. People rolled up in wheelchairs. They walked up with neighbors. They brought their children and grandchildren. In all, 362 people came for the free tests. Of those, nearly 17% tested positive, more than triple the Palm Beach County average that week of 5.4%. Some had no symptoms and are working despite the stay at home orders. Many were families with multiple people infected within a home.

"That is why testing in the underserved communities is so important. As a state, we are only as strong as our weakest link. Once we know who has this virus, we can isolate and get people well," said Yolette Bonnet, FoundCare's CEO.

Organizations like FoundCare find they must educate Spanish-speaking clients about their risk of contracting the virus, how to prevent contracting it, and the need to get tested.

Over the last two months, Florida has expanded testing in minority communities, but critical gaps remain, health officials and leaders in these communities say.

Widespread testing ramped up across the state in mid-March, when a series of drive-thru test sites opened for those with symptoms. But drive-thru testing doesn't work for individuals without cars, and 8% of households in South Florida don't own a car, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. In mid-April, the first two walk-up test sites opened in Pompano Beach and downtown Fort Lauderdale, and walk-up sites in Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, and three other counties followed.

"If you're poor, you don't have access to a car, so places like Coconut Grove, places like Perrine, you don't have easy access (to testing)" says Dr. Cheryl Holder, Program Director of Panther College of Medicine communities and state chair of the National Medical Association, an African American Health association.

With the help of the Florida congressional black caucus and others, Holder's organization submitted a letter to the governor on April 9 with a six-point plan to control the pandemic in minority communities.

"They were very receptive, we met with Department of Emergency Management Director Jared Moskowitz, we met with Surgeon General (Scott) Rivkees," she says. Since the letter, at least four walk-up test sites in black communities have opened.

But, Holder explains, neighborhoods are still being left out. "Definitely, areas are missing," she says, along with education to Haitian and other Afro-Caribbean communities on why, where and how to get tested is lacking.

In Miramar, Mayor Wayne Messam said he has asked the state to help open a test site in his city in partnership with CVS. There are no testing sites in Miramar, the city with the largest percentage of black residents in Broward. "People of color are at an even higher risk with this virus," Messam said. "As we prepare to re-open, our residents need access to testing. The more information our community has puts us in a better position."

Marleine Bastien, executive director of the Family Action Network Movement, a Little Haiti social services organization, says that her community could also use a walk-up test site. Currently, people in Little Haiti without cars need to go to a North Miami church parking lot to get tested. "It is a hindrance to our members," she says.

Already, the state has seen how devastating the virus has been in the black community, underscoring the critical need for testing. The spread of the virus is particularly concerning in the black community where the prevalence of diabetes, obesity and hypertension have exacerbated the mortality rate.

While blacks make up just 17% of Florida's population, they account for 22% of all COVID-19 deaths. The disparity is starker in South Florida. Though blacks make up only 19% of the region's population, they account for about 30% of hospitalizations and 26% of deaths.

Expanded diagnostic testing alone won't be enough to stop the spread of the virus through minority communities and beyond.

Individuals who have tested positive for coronavirus and do not require immediate medical attention must be isolated. But gaps in sick leave policies, substandard housing, and the prevalence of multi-generational households in minority communities make such quarantine difficult.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found less than 20% of black workers and roughly 16% of Hispanic ones are able to telecommute. About two-thirds of employed Hispanic adults say they