

Hebrew Home at Riverdale launches massive testing effort

The Hebrew Home at Riverdale, part of RiverSpring Health, has begun testing its 1,000 employees for Covid-19 twice a week.

The effort closely follows Gov. Andrew Cuomo's directive for the state's nursing homes—particularly hard hit by the pandemic—to do so. But the feat is far from easy.

The sprawling, Bronx-based nursing home has repurposed its own nursing staff to do the swabbing and is receiving testing supplies from the National Guard. It has enlisted its clerical staff to handle the administrative needs of testing workers and partnered with New York-Presbyterian to process the tests at cost. The site is open 12 hours a day, five days a week.

"It's a big task," said David V. Pomeranz, chief operating officer of the home. "Testing 1,000 people twice a week is an enormous responsibility [coupled] with the enormous challenge of dealing with a pandemic."

Without assistance, the cost for regular full-staff testing could run about \$1 million a month, Pomeranz said. He added that it's a prohibitive cost for organizations that already struggle with low Medicaid reimbursement. However, the cost is a secondary focus during the crisis.

"We feel it's a very important tool, and it's doing its job," Pomeranz said of staff testing. "People are not feeling sick at all, but they might be contagious."

In its first few days, the staff-testing effort has identified about 22 asymptomatic cases. Those employees were sent home to recover to avoid spreading the disease to vulnerable residents and other staff. Results have been available in about 24 hours.

The state Department of Health recently completed a facilitywide testing of the home's staff and identified 63 asymptomatic cases. There have been no worker fatalities.

The Hebrew Home of Riverdale initially reported 35 resident deaths determined by its medical director to be Covid-19-related or -suspected. The Department of Health reviewed 119 recent deaths with leadership, and an additional 28 were identified as being possibly related to the virus.

As of Friday, 66 resident deaths have been determined to be Covid-19-related or -suspected. The Department of Health and all families have been notified.

The Hebrew Home at Riverdale has a total capacity of about 750 residents.

Other efforts to decrease the spread and risk of infections among elderly and otherwise vulnerable residents have included virtual dining gatherings and securing large quantities of personal protective equipment, Pomeranz said.

Additionally, early in the crisis the facility designated four isolated floors as recovery areas for patients discharged from the hospital and existing residents.

For nursing homes around the country, there's been a lot of catch-up as information about the virus has continually changed, Pomeranz said.

"I don't expect the numbers to continue to be the way they were throughout the state and throughout the country," Pomeranz said.

"The ability to expand and improve the accuracy and timeline of testing until there's a vaccine is really the key piece," he continued, adding that visitors also will be tested once they're allowed back on-site. "Having a testing site right in our facility gives us an element of control."

—Jennifer Henderson