

HUMAN FECES MAP FINDS HOMELESS IN SAN FRANCISCO

SAN FRANCISCO: Jennifer Wong has found a way to track the homeless and determine where help is needed: mapping where people defecate on the streets of San Francisco. Wong, a Web developer, used a city database to create the interactive maps, which she dubbed "(Human) Wasteland." They dramatically illustrate the problem of homelessness in a city of sharp divides between rich and poor.

Wong's maps won a competition at work. She donated some of her winnings to a project that provides mobile toilets and showers to the homeless. The maps are based on the database of complaints about human feces and urine phoned in to the city's Department of Public Works in 2013. On the maps, the complaints are depicted with tiny images of what look like unwrapped chocolate Hershey's kisses.

From June-November 2014, more than 5,000 complaints were phoned in, most of them in the Tenderloin, the downtown neighborhood of the homeless, shelters and cheap hotels. But the maps, published on Wong's website, also show a concentration of poop in much of northeastern San Francisco and in the onetime hippie enclave of Haight-Ashbury. The maps prompted some tongue-in-cheek humor about human excrement. But they also started a conversation about the need for affordable housing in the increasingly expensive Bay Area, as well as for toilets, laundry facilities and showers for the homeless.

"There's not much choice other than the street when a homeless person needs a bathroom," said Wong. "It's pretty clear where the need is." She said her curiosity was initially piqued when she learned that the city tracks feces and urine complaints. She found the complaints in the Department of Public Works online database as she was working on a neighborhood tracking project for a subsidiary of the real estate company Zillow. "I grew up in the Bay Area," Wong said. "San Francisco has a reputation as a city that offers lots of services for the homeless. But I realized there's so much more we should be doing, like providing toilets." Advocates for the homeless believe the number of people on the street will increase as housing prices climb. The official homeless count in San Francisco is 7,500, although service providers believe it is closer to 10,000.

City 'pit stop'

As human waste complaints rose, the Department of Public Works launched a pilot program called the Tenderloin Pit Stop in the summer to deliver and collect portable toilets for the homeless every day. Complaints in the area have dropped, and the city is considering expanding the operation to other areas, according to spokeswoman Rachel Gordon.

Wong, meanwhile, donated some of the winnings from her project to an innovative project called Lava Mae - a slight twist on "wash me" in Spanish - that recently began providing toilets and showers on wheels. Lava Mae was launched by philanthropist and former marketing executive Doniece Sandoval, who obtained a decommissioned city bus and outfitted it with two private units with a shower, changing area and toilet. The bus parks outside different homeless facilities three times a week, and is hooked up to fire hydrants, with water feeding into a propane-fueled heater.

Lava Mae hopes to put three more buses on the street in 2015. "To have a bit of privacy and get clean can make a big difference in people's lives," Lava Mae manager Leah Filler said. The bus is a hit with the homeless. "People don't realize how not having access to things like showers and toilets can make our lives so much harder," said a happy Jeremy Runcon, 36, at the Youth With a Mission homeless facility in the Tenderloin. "How can anyone get a job when they smell?" — Reuters

REPORT PROMPTS MIXED VIEW OF HEALTH CARE SIGN-UPS

WASHINGTON: The first 50-state report on the latest sign-up season under President Barack Obama's health care law shows that more than 4 million people selected plans for the first time or re-enrolled. The administration called it "an encouraging start." More than 3.4 million people enrolled using HealthCare.gov as of Dec 15, and more than 600,000 people selected plans in the state-run marketplaces, according to a Health and Human Services Department report released Tuesday. The figures are generally up to date through Dec 13.

About half of those enrolling are first-timers and half are returning customers, suggesting there are about 2 million Americans new to the program. The figures look good for the administration meeting its goal of 9.1 million customers signed up and paying premiums in 2015, independent experts said. But they predicted the program won't meet another target: the 13 million enrollments in 2015 forecast by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office. "It would take a massive surge in enrollment over the next six weeks" to reach 13 million, said

Larry Levitt of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. Other experts believe that for the program to be sustainable it would have to exceed the goal set by the administration. "I really think they need to get to 13 million this year to have a sustainable program, not this low-ball estimate that nobody takes seriously," said Washington-based health care consultant Robert Laszewski. "We don't know how many of these people are going to pay. And we don't know how many of the existing people are going to re-enroll."

Young adults still aren't flocking to the program, which could increase costs down the road. About 24 percent of the enrollees are 18 to 34 years old, an age group needed to offset the costs of older, sicker enrollees and keep premiums from rising. That's about the same proportion of young people signing up in the first three months of last enrollment season. Laszewski and other independent experts say that should be closer to 40 percent to help keep premiums down.

Technical problems

The report includes figures for 14 state marketplaces



WASHINGTON: In this July 28, 2014 file photo, Health and US Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell speaks at the Treasury Department. — AP

including Washington, DC, and the 37 states using HealthCare.gov. It doesn't include people who are being automatically re-enrolled in health plans because that re-enrollment process happened on the federal marketplace Dec 16-18. The numbers are significantly larger than during the first month of enrollment last year, when HealthCare.gov was plagued with technical problems. Then, the nationwide sign-up total after the first month was 106,000. This year, open enrollment runs through Feb 15. People enrolling by that date will get coverage starting March 1. Current customers can still make plan

changes through Feb 15. "Interest in the Marketplace has been strong during the first month of open enrollment," Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell said in a statement. "We still have a ways to go and a lot of work to do before Feb 15, but this is an encouraging start." The administration noted that about 87 percent of people who selected health plans through HealthCare.gov will get financial assistance. The health care law provides taxpayer-subsidized private insurance to people who don't have access to coverage through their jobs. — AP

EBOLA-HIT UK NURSE TREATED WITH SURVIVOR'S PLASMA, TRIAL DRUG

LONDON: A British nurse who contracted Ebola in West Africa is being treated with the blood plasma of someone who survived the virus and an experimental anti-viral drug, the doctor supervising her care said yesterday. Pauline Cafferkey, who had been volunteering at a British-built treatment centre in Sierra Leone, is being treated at the Royal Free hospital in London, which has the only isolation ward in Britain equipped for Ebola sufferers. Doctor Michael Jacobs said she was sitting up, reading and talking to medics from inside her isolation tent but warned that the Ebola virus was unpredictable and that her health could get worse.

"We've decided to treat her with two things, the first of which is convalescent plasma," Jacobs told reporters. "The second thing that we've given her is an experimental antiviral drug." The plasma was taken from the blood of a patient successfully treated in Europe and chosen from a shared European stockpile as the most appropriate for Cafferkey. The antibodies it contains should help her fight the virus, Jacobs explained.

The experimental drug is not ZMapp, the drug used to treat fellow British volunteer nurse William Pooley, who recovered from Ebola, because "there is none in the world at the moment," Jacobs said. "There is no specific treatment for Ebola that has been proven to work," he emphasized. Cafferkey is the first person to test positive for Ebola in Britain and the second to be treated for the virus in the country after Pooley, who has since returned to Sierra Leone. Cafferkey expressed concern about her temperature to airport officials when she returned to London from Sierra Leone via Casablanca in Morocco on Sunday.

Her temperature was taken at London Heathrow Airport but did not raise alarms and she was cleared to take a connecting flight home to Glasgow. She was eventually diagnosed with Ebola on Monday and flown from a Glasgow hospital to London on a military plane.

Treatment went 'very smoothly'

"Ebola runs a very variable course and the next few days are going to be very critical," Jacobs said. "Things may get worse; we hope that the treatment will make her better," he said, adding that Cafferkey was in the very early stages of the virus and the situation would be clearer in a week's time. He said the medical team looking after her had discussed treatment options with her. She has also been in communication with her family through an intercom, though they can see one another.

"She's as well as we can hope for at this stage of the illness," said Jacobs. "She's had the treatment, it's gone very smoothly, no side-effects at all." The British government's chief medical officer Sally Davies told ITV television that there would be a review of airport screening procedures even though Cafferkey "had no symptoms" at Heathrow. "Her temperature was within the acceptable range," she said. A doctor who travelled back to London with Cafferkey had complained of "shambolic" screening procedures in Britain.

Meanwhile two patients who recently returned to Britain from west Africa tested negative for Ebola. The two had been tested separately at hospitals in Aberdeen in Scotland and Cornwall in southwest England. The patients were unconnected to Cafferkey. — AFP

INDIA TO CHECK ON TOILET USE IN 'REAL TIME'

NEW DELHI: India's government yesterday announced a nationwide scheme to check whether people are using toilets as part of a cleanliness drive championed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Since October the government has provided 503,142 new household latrines. But experts say most of these end up being used as storerooms since many people consider toilets unhygienic and prefer to squat in the open, believing it more sanitary to defecate far from home.

Sanitary inspectors will go door-to-door to "check and verify the use of toilets" with mobile phones, tablets or iPads and upload the results onto a website in "real time", a government press release said. "Earlier, the monitoring was done only about the construction of toilets, but now the actual use of toilets will be ascertained," it said.

Modi announced the cleanliness drive in his Independence Day speech in August, pledging a toilet in every household by 2019. UNICEF estimates that almost 594 million people or nearly 50 percent of India's population-defecate in the open, with the situation worst in dirt-poor rural areas. Lack of toilets and other sanitation problems costs India nearly \$54 billion annually through illnesses such as diarrhoea and lower productivity, a 2012 World Bank study found. The latest government monitoring program is aimed at motivating people to use the toilet. "Sanitation is a mindset issue. (The aim is to) create demand by triggering behavior change," the government statement said. — AFP

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