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## The South Bay Deserves to Be Treated Like an 'Essential' Community

Posted By *Sara Libby* On May 19, 2020 @ 3:58 pm



Health care workers with Family Health Centers of San Diego stand ready to help patients at a coronavirus testing center in Chula Vista. / Photo by Adriana Heldiz

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many strengths and weaknesses in our society.

The Air Force's famous Thunderbirds flew over the San Diego skies on Friday to salute all first responders and essential workers for continuing to provide the critical services we all need. The aerial show was a beautiful display of gratitude. But beyond our thanks, we should be using this time to ask ourselves some difficult questions. Mainly, do we serve our essential workers like they are serving us now? And even more critical: Do our essential workers have the resources to cope with the consequences that COVID-19 is having on their communities?

The answer, unfortunately, is no.

In San Diego, the communities in the South Bay <sup>[1]</sup> are carrying a lot of the weight that comes with this pandemic. As of May, the rates of infection in San Ysidro, National City, Otay Mesa and Chula Vista remain the highest in the county <sup>[2]</sup>. There, in these hot spots of infection, live our grocers, truck drivers, custodians, meat packers and other disguised heroes. They are all working and risking their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, amid the worst virus outbreak this generation has ever faced. Officials from the South Bay <sup>[3]</sup> are demanding that the county handle this outcome immediately and appropriately, mainly with testing sites. And while getting more testing in the southern parts of the county, and in the county in general, is crucial to getting our COVID-19 numbers down, the reality is that the South Bay is more susceptible to the virus because of the conditions of its communities.

The South Bay includes Barrio Logan, National City, Chula Vista, Imperial Beach, San Ysidro and Otay Mesa. It is an area riddled with poor air quality, limited safe parks and broken or missing sidewalks <sup>[4]</sup> partly due to the border proximity and high concentration of industry. It is also an area that serves many residents who are more likely to have a chronic illness such as asthma, diabetes or a heart condition because of the combination of bad air quality and limited green space. Further, according to the county, over 46 percent of residents in this region are cost-burdened, meaning they contribute over 30 percent of their income to housing alone. And more than 25 percent of the population earn less than \$35,000 a year. This means that South Bay residents — our essential workers — are far more likely to struggle with finances. They live paycheck to paycheck and are more likely to skip the doctor's visits — and their co-payments — to buy food for the week.

All of these conditions make a virus like COVID-19 far deadlier in southern San Diego than in an area like La Jolla, where these harmful environmental conditions are not so rampant. And yet, we continue to ask our essential workers living in the South Bay to show up to work every day despite the augmented risk. Because without them, our society crumbles.

The truth of the matter is that our essential workers in San Diego are living in places where their ZIP code has a greater impact on their lives than their genetic code <sup>[5]</sup>. And this needs to change.

COVID-19 has brought to light the importance of our essential workers during times of crisis. It has also further exposed how our systemic racism <sup>[6]</sup> affects communities like the ones found in southern San Diego County.

San Ysidro and Otay Mesa's population is more than 90 percent Latino. And the southern region of the county in general has the highest concentration of minority residents, approximately 78 percent. We cannot continue to under-serve these communities. And we especially cannot continue to do so on the basis of race and ethnicity. These communities are the backbone of our country, housing those who work when no one else can. They are our *essential communities*.

One silver lining of COVID-19 is that social programs that provide support to communities like the ones in the South Bay are seeing new interest and resources. We are now witnessing San Diego County accelerate funding to programs that, for example, provide bilingual assistance to all those navigating the county's system for relief resources. And we are seeing the county directly address problems like homelessness that before COVID-19 were impossible to solve. We need to take advantage of this momentum and make sure that we continue to support these programs, even after we get past COVID-19. These programs directly improve our essential communities. They are the foundation needed to keep working-families sheltered, fed and connected. This will ensure that our essential workers and their communities are healthy enough to protect us again. We owe them that much.

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URLs in this post:

[1] communities in the South Bay:

<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/Epidemiology/COVID-19%20Summary%20of%20Cases%20by%20Zip%20Code.pdf>

[2] remain the highest in the county: <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/what-we-know-about-the-surge-of-south-bay-coronavirus-cases/>

[3] Officials from the South Bay: <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/communities/south-county/chula-vista/story/2020-04-23/south-bay-officials-demand-more-coronavirus-testing-as-confirmed-cases-increase>

[4] It is an area riddled with poor air quality, limited safe parks and broken or missing sidewalks:

[https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/CHS/Health%20Briefs/Health%20Briefs\\_South\\_2018.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/CHS/Health%20Briefs/Health%20Briefs_South_2018.pdf)

[5] their ZIP code has a greater impact on their lives than their genetic code:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eu7d0BMRt0o>

[6] systemic racism: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/magazine/racial-disparities-covid-19.html>

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