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BATTLING COVID-19

Can survivors' blood help others too weak to fight?



KARL MONDON — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elle Wohlmut spent 14 days quarantined as a COVID-19 patient in her San Francisco apartment. Now healthy, Wohlmut was the first recovered patient to donate antibody-rich plasma to Stanford Blood Center's collection.

Stanford and UCSF are taking donations in an effort to aid critically ill patients

By Lisa M. Krieger and Ashleigh Papp
Staff writers

Elle Wohlmut's blood is rich in immune cells that waged war, and won, against COVID-19.

They protected her. Could they help someone else?

Volunteers in a desperate new treatment strategy, Wohlmut and other COVID survivors are donating their virus-fighting antibodies at Bay Area blood banks in an effort to save those who are less lucky.

Last week, their cells were shipped to critically ill patients in California and Midwestern hospitals.

"I have the ability to give back in a unique and unprecedented way," said 27-year-old Wohlmut, a San Francisco resident whose brief illness last month caused only a mild fever, minor body aches and a trivial cough. "It felt like a no-brainer."

As deaths climb with no proven treatment or vaccine

INSIDE

Fremont first Bay Area city requiring all employees, customers of many essential businesses to wear masks. B1

in sight, such donations are a medical Hail Mary.

There is little evidence that a plasma transfusion from a COVID survivor can help a sick patient fight the disease. But the potential is so enticing that U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulators have waived the traditional testing requirements and authorized emergency shipments to the critically ill. As of Monday, doctors have requested plasma for 316 patients; of these, 64 have completed their transfusions.

To boost donations, Stanford, UC San Francisco and 853 other sites around the nation are now registering patients to contribute so-called "convalescent plasma." The effort, called Expanded Access Program



COURTESY OF ELLE WOHLMUTH

Wohlmut, 27, donates antibody-rich plasma at Stanford Blood Center on April 7. Now recovered, she was infected by COVID-19 while working in Europe in early March.

for Convalescent Plasma for the Treatment of Patients with COVID-19 protocol, is organized by Minnesota's Mayo Clinic. They also hope to give it to sick Bay Area patients, if needed.

Stanford Blood Center started on April 7, welcoming Wohlmut as its first donor.

"We're ramping up collections this week and hope it will grow," said Dr. Suchi Pandey, chief medical officer at Stanford Blood Cen-

ter, which is partnering with hospitals in the Bay Area and beyond to build a wider network of donors. "If you are someone who had COVID and has recovered, then please consider a donation. One donor can potentially help up to three patients."

UC San Francisco is erecting a tent and soliciting volunteers to open this week or next.

"Americans have always risen to a challenge," said in-

PLASMA » PAGE 6

'OPENING UP AMERICA AGAIN'

Trump: 3-phase plan for reopening

'You're going to call your own shots' for easing restrictions, the president tells governors

By Fiona Kelliher
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Days after saying he intended to assert his authority to reopen the country, President Donald Trump unveiled new phased guidelines that allow governors in hard-hit states such as California to set their own pace for loosening stay-at-home orders.

In an afternoon news conference, Trump emphasized that any return to normalcy could look drastically different in states such as Wyoming, with few cases, and epicenters such as New York — but that his administration would help jurisdictions looking to reopen to do so as fast as possible.

"We can begin the next front of the war, which we call opening up America again," Trump said. "We have to do that. America wants to be open, and Americans want to be open."

That message came in stark contrast to that of California Gov. Gavin Newsom's. Newsom earlier this week laid out six criteria that will be required to roll back his statewide restrictions. Newsom doesn't expect to lay out a reopening timeline for at least two weeks.

On Thursday, Newsom, who had just left a call in which the White House unveiled its guidelines first for governors, said that the president's words were "in line" with what he was hoping to hear.

But he emphasized California is not yet out of the woods: Despite a modest decline from Wednesday in the number of patients hospital-

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JANE TYSKA — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

People walk past a social distancing awareness sign along Shore Line Drive near Crown Beach in Alameda on Wednesday.

HIGH HOUSING COSTS

Federal stimulus checks: How much will they really help?

Analysis: \$1,200 does less for Bay Area renters, homeowners

By Louis Hansen
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As federal stimulus checks land in bank accounts in coming days, a sobering reality may hit many Bay Area residents — the money will cover less of their housing costs than anywhere else in the country.

More than 9 in 10 Bay Area homeowners would have less than half their monthly mortgage and utilities paid by a \$1,200 coronavirus-related

stimulus check, the smallest relief for any region in the country, according to a new analysis by Redfin. Even most two-income families receiving \$2,400 in aid would come up well short of paying Bay Area mortgages and utilities.

Bay Area renters, too, will see relatively less relief than anywhere else in the country. Just 1 in 5 renters in San Jose and 1 in 3 in San Francisco and the East Bay would see the majority of their housing costs paid with a \$1,200 check.

"That's not going to help too much," said Redfin senior economist Schery Bokhari.

Bay Area housing costs re-

"That's not going to help too much."

— Redfin senior economist Schery Bokhari

main among the highest in the nation. The median sale price for a single-family home in seven Bay Area counties in February was \$888,100, according to Zillow. Despite a falling stock market and shelter-in-place restrictions, demand has kept prices high, Bay Area real estate professionals say.

"Inventory is extremely low," said San Mateo County agent

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ECONOMIC FALLOUT

Unemployment numbers stagger: 1 in 7 out of work

2.8M Californians have lost jobs, 661,000 last week

By George Avalos
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More than 600,000 Californians filed new unemployment claims last week as the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic mounted in the state, where 1 out of every 7 workers has lost a job in the past month.

Nationwide, 5.25 million people filed initial unemployment claims, which pushed the number of people who have lost their jobs in the United States over the last four weeks to around 21 million. Shelter-in-place orders in California and across the nation have closed businesses, shops and restaurants, keeping work-

ers at home and with few options to replace all of their lost income.

About 2.82 million California residents have filed for unemployment over the last month, based on the preliminary estimates from federal officials, including 661,000 last week.

For some of the newly unemployed in the Bay Area, frustration is mounting as they can't get through the torrent of phone calls to the beleaguered

INSIDE

Overwhelmed small-business lending program on hold; GoPro cuts more than 200 jobs. C9

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WEATHER

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Plasma

FROM PAGE 1

fectious disease expert Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, who with Dr. Annie Luetkemeyer is leading UCSF's program. "I have no doubt that they'll also do it this time."

In San Jose, obstetrician-gynecologist Dr. Phuong Nguyen is registering to donate. The 52-year old chief medical officer of Santa Clara Valley Medical Center sickened after attending an annual national conference for postgraduate medical training in late February. Now she's healthy.

"It should go where someone needs it," she said. "Once you experience COVID, you can relate to patients' symptoms, and the sense of fear, uncertainty and concern. ... It makes me want to try to do even more things to help people."

While new to COVID-19, plasma donation is an approach that dates to the late 1800s and for decades was a mainstay of treatment for infectious diseases such as rabies, snake bites, and hepatitis A and B.

It was developed as a treatment during the 1918 flu pandemic and has also been used during the SARS, MERS and 2009 H1N1 outbreaks.

"There is biological plausibility that it works," said Chin-Hong. "And we have very little in the way of current proven antiviral or other therapies for an illness that has a high mortality in certain populations."

One very small Chinese study, published in the March 27 Journal of the American Medical Association, reported encourag-



KARL MONDON — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elle Wohlmutz, right, and her roommate Gwendolyn Umbach make lasagna together in their San Francisco apartment on Saturday. Wohlmutz is a COVID-19 survivor.

ing — yet early — results of treatment.

This is the concept: People who have recovered from COVID-19 have an abundant supply of so-called "neutralizing antibodies" that their body built to fight off the virus. These antibodies only live in the straw-colored plasma of the blood.

When those people donate their blood, the antibodies are filtered out and removed, and then injected intravenously into someone whose body isn't able to produce its own immune response or fight off the disease.

It's also thought that these antibodies could be given preemptively to health care workers, to help boost their immune system as they fight on the front lines of the pandemic.

Everyone who is sick

makes these neutralizing antibodies, said UCSF's Chin-Hong. But for many patients, "it is late. It's not around when you need it."

"So you find someone else who's been there, done that," he said. "You transfer their army to neutralize the virus in someone else."

"We don't know if it works in COVID-19," he added. "But it's a cool idea."

To study its effectiveness, a smaller group of physicians and scientists from 57 institutions in 46 states, led by Johns Hopkins University, have self-organized to conduct a formal research study, called the National COVID-19 Convalescent Plasma Project. If proven beneficial, that could lead to FDA approval for wider use.

In these clinical trials, only certain patients are eligible

to participate. Half get the plasma; the other half gets an inactive placebo. Doctors closely watch for side effects and measure clinical signs and death rates.

Such research may reveal that COVID-19, like Ebola, hepatitis C, HIV and some other viral diseases, does not respond to plasma infusions.

But if the plasma looks promising, the trials can help inform future strategies, suggesting who is likely to benefit and the best time to offer treatment. Virus-fighting plasma likely will work best if used early during the illness, said Chin-Hong, "when a patient is sick but not too sick." In the later stages of illness, it's the body's hyperactive inflammatory response, rather than the virus, that's the primary concern.

"If you predict who would

HOW CAN I SIGN UP TO RECEIVE CONVALESCENT PLASMA FOR COVID-19?

If you think you or a family member may benefit from convalescent plasma for COVID-19, talk to the doctor about convalescent plasma and ask them to go to www.uscovid-plasma.org to determine eligibility and register.

I JUST RECOVERED FROM COVID-19 AND WANT TO DONATE MY PLASMA. WHERE CAN I GO?

- Stanford Blood Center: stanfordbloodcenter.org/convalescent-plasma-from-recovered-covid-19-patients
- UC San Francisco is not yet accepting donations but will be setting up blood drives at the Parnassus campus and Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital.
- You may donate your plasma at any American Association of Blood Banks-accredited blood donation facility or through an American Red Cross blood drive.
- Find a Red Cross donation site: www.redcrossblood.org/donate-blood/dlp/plasma-information.html
- Find an AABB-accredited blood donation site: www.aabb.org/tm/donation/Pages/Blood-Bank-Locator.aspx

get sick," he said, "you could give the product to stop the virus in its tracks."

And not every survivor has abundant antibodies, he added. People with very mild illness may not have enough to donate.

Stanford and UCSF will conduct such focused research in the future — but for now, they're participating in an alternative approach, called "expanded access."

Less intent on data collection, it's a massive last-ditch effort to save lives at hundreds of participating hospitals.

Local donations will go into a centralized distribution system for patients everywhere.

In many ways, plasma donation is a lot like conventional blood draw. It takes a little longer, perhaps 45 minutes or so. The preparation is identical.

It differs in that it uses a procedure called apheresis, which collects only plasma. Other parts of the blood,

such as hemoglobin, are returned to the donor.

And the donation criteria are much stricter. Donors must have tested positive for the virus when they were ill, recovered, have had no symptoms for 14 days, and now test negative.

Because there has been such a great shortage of tests, many potential donors won't qualify. Those who qualify can donate repeatedly.

"I was lucky. I feel really privileged that I was able to be tested," said Wohlmutz. A senior program manager for global inclusion and diversity initiatives at Apple, she was infected while traveling in Europe for work. "I'm not elderly. I'm not sick. I don't fall into any of the high-risk categories."

"There are people who need our help now," she added. "We can all do a little bit of something."

Staff writer Julia Prodis Sulek contributed to this report.

Stimulus

FROM PAGE 1

Wilson Leung. "People are still motivated to buy."

The median rent in April for a two-bedroom apartment was \$2,990 in Oakland, \$3,030 in San Jose and \$4,540 in San Francisco, according to rental listing site Zumper.

The federal stimulus checks are part of a \$2.2 trillion aid package passed

by Congress in March. Individuals receive up to \$1,200 and couples get up to \$2,400, plus \$500 per child. But the stimulus phases out at higher incomes, beginning at \$75,000 of adjusted gross income for individuals and \$150,000 for couples.

The Bay Area's median annual household income is about \$96,000, and many residents in high-income communities will not receive full stimulus checks.

But other factors could

ease the pain for residents struggling to meet mortgages and rents.

Out-of-work Californians have received an extra, \$600 weekly supplement to unemployment payments, helping bridge gaps in lost income.

High Bay Area rents often mean more than two tenants, bringing multiple incomes and relief checks, to help with housing costs.

Nationally, a single stimulus check is expected to cover most or all of hous-

ing expenses for 3 in 4 renters, according to the Redfin analysis of census data.

Just about half of all U.S. homeowners would have most of their mortgages covered by the federal checks.

But things look much worse in the San Jose and San Francisco metros, which ranked 50th and 49th, respectively, among the 50 largest metropolitan regions studied. The median monthly mortgage payment in San Fran-

cisco and the East Bay was \$3,100, while the median in the San Jose metro was \$3,370.

The coronavirus pandemic has not eased the tension between supply and demand in the housing market so far, according to Redfin research. Both buyers and sellers are pulling back in equal measure, leaving prices relatively stable, Bokhari said.

Redfin saw demand for customers taking their first home tours drop 26%, year-

over-year, during the first week of April. But at the same time, home listings on the site also dropped 44% from the previous year.

Bokhari cautioned that a lengthy downturn and higher unemployment could push home prices down. Consumers are less willing to make big purchases when their incomes fall or employment seems uncertain.

Contact Louis Hansen at 408-920-5043.

Jobless

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state Employment Development Department or are being told they don't qualify for state unemployment benefits despite making only a modest annual wage.

San Jose resident Monica Morris-Aranda was furloughed from her job in March at a high-end Palo Alto steakhouse after never having been unemployed before. She has yet to get any payments.

"I pay taxes every year," Morris-Aranda said. "The moment I need unemployment, I can't get it. The system has failed us."

Morris-Aranda said she was told she does not qualify for benefits.

"This is not what I would have hoped for," Morris-Aranda said. "I have received nothing from the EDD. I was hoping for a payment in 10 days, then 20 days, and now it's 30 days and the EDD says that I don't qualify. And they provide no explanation."

On Wednesday, state Labor Secretary Julie Su conceded that some may think the EDD has faltered in its mission.

"I acknowledge there is frustration in California over unemployment insurance benefits," Su said during an appearance at the governor's coronavirus news briefing.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and Su said they have taken steps to increase the EDD call center hours to 12 hours a day, seven days a week, up dramatically from

the current four hours a day, five days a week. The new EDD call center goes live Monday so people can phone from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

But there is one area of relief already: California has begun to distribute unemployment payments to jobless workers that include an additional \$600 financed by the federal government. The average state benefit is \$340 a week, which would grow to \$940 a week with the supplemental payment.

However, other newly unemployed workers also said they have yet to receive any benefits from the state.

Veronica Martinez, a Richmond resident who was laid off from the call center at Marin General Hospital, makes about \$57,000 a year yet was told by the EDD online system

that she didn't qualify for unemployment benefits.

"How am I going to pay my mortgage and make my car payment?" Martinez said. "I don't understand how the EDD says I make too much money. I'm not getting any unemployment benefits."

Ash Tawadros, who works at Cole European, a Walnut Creek auto dealership, recognizes the unemployment benefits can only be a short-term remedy.

"I generally earn a lot more, and this is just a short term Band-Aid," Tawadros said. "I'm in the high-end automotive industry. I believe the high-end will take longer to recover. People will be looking at needs versus wants and repair their cars versus buy new."

"I look forward to get-

ting back to work once this whole mess is over with," Tawadros added.

Separately, the Small Business Administration said \$376 billion in relief for small businesses was set to expire because funding for the loans has been exhausted. Congress must authorize more cash for the program.

In California, grocery, farm, fast-food and delivery workers, and others in the food sector in California, will receive two extra weeks of supplemental paid sick leave if they were subject to a coronavirus-linked isolation order, quarantine or medical directive, under an executive order signed Thursday by Newsom.

"A lot of folks could easily dial it in, file for unemployment insurance, wait

for this thing to pass," Newsom said. "But there's dignity with work ... and with dignity comes respect and admiration."

As the days wear on without work or state unemployment payments, some workers wonder what's next for them as they attempt to navigate an increasingly forbidding economic landscape in California.

"It's pretty tough," Morris-Aranda said. "I'm getting by because I have a pretty optimistic attitude. I'm in a group chat, so we are using everyone's resources to find answers about people getting benefits. But the government isn't coming through."

Staff writer Fiona Kelliher contributed to this report. Contact George Avalos at 408-859-5167.

Virus

FROM PAGE 1

ized, the number in intensive care statewide was up.

"We need to continue to not just bend the curve but flatten the curve and then see these trend lines begin to decline substantially so that we can begin the process of toggling back and forth in terms of looser and in some cases more restrictive protocols to get back to some sense of normalcy," Newsom said.

Trump's guidelines aim to ease restrictions in areas with low transmission of the coronavirus while holding the line in worse-off locations. They make clear that the return to normalcy will be a far longer process than Trump initially envisioned, with federal officials warning that some social distancing measures may need to remain in place through the end of the year to prevent a new outbreak.

"You're going to call your own shots," Trump told the governors during the call, according to an audio recording obtained by The As-

sociated Press. "We're going to be standing alongside of you."

The administration's guidelines advise places with consistently declining infections and strong testing capabilities to kick off a gradual reopening of businesses and schools. Before a state or county could move from one phase to the next, it would have to see no evidence of cases rebounding for two weeks.

In phase one, for instance, the plan recommends strict social distancing for all people in public. Nonessential travel is discouraged. Telecommuting would continue, while schools, day care and camps would remain closed. It would allow gatherings of up to 10 people, and restaurants, movie theaters, gyms, places of worship and sporting venues could open with "strict physical distancing protocols."

In phase two, people are encouraged to maximize social distancing where possible and limit gatherings to no more than 50 people unless precautionary measures are taken. Travel could resume, schools and day care would reopen, and large ven-

ues could operate with moderate social distancing. But visits to senior care homes would remain off limits.

Phase three envisions a return to normalcy for most Americans, with unrestricted staffing of workplaces and allowing the vulnerable and elderly to resume public interactions with appropriate physical distancing and sanitation measures.

In California, the timeline for implementing such changes remains unclear as cases and deaths continue to rise. Statewide, local public health departments reported 85 new deaths from the coronavirus on Thursday, upping the toll to 970. Total cases climbed to 28,035, an increase of 967 from Wednesday, according to data compiled by this news organization.

For the first time since the pandemic began, Newsom said, the number of COVID-19 patients in California hospitals declined slightly Thursday, with 3,141 patients hospitalized. That represents a 0.9% decrease since Wednesday. Still, the number of patients in California ICUs increased by

1.4% to 1,191.

In the Bay Area, meanwhile, cases continued to climb upward. Alameda County surpassed 1,000 infections for the first time, reporting 43 new cases for a total of 1,007, and two new deaths for a total of 39. San Mateo County reported eight new deaths over the past 10 days for a total of 28, while its case count rose by 20 to 768. San Francisco reported six new cases but no deaths, leaving the totals at 1,019 cases and 17 deaths. Santa Clara County reported 40 new cases and four more deaths for a total of 1,833 cases and 69 deaths. Contra Costa County reported 16 new cases for a total of 631, with four new cases for a total of 18.

Newsom called the latest death counts a sobering reminder of the need to adhere to the state's shelter-in-place order, which does not have an end date.

At earliest, Trump's guidelines suggest, some parts of the country could see a resumption in normal business and social gatherings after a month of evaluating whether easing up on restrictions has led to a re-

surgence in virus cases. In other parts of the country, or if virus cases pick up, it could be substantially longer.

In briefing the governors on the plan, Trump said they were going to be responsible for deciding when it is safe to lift restrictions in their states. Just days before, he had drawn swift pushback for claiming he had the absolute authority to determine how and when states would reopen.

Seven Midwestern governors announced Thursday they will coordinate on reopening their economies. Similar pacts were announced earlier in the week in the West and Northeast. Even as the federal guidelines were announced, governors had begun setting their own courses. In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that state's shutdown would last until at least May 15, while Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said he planned to begin lifting restrictions on public activities starting May 1.

"Not every state, not every region will do it at the same time — that's clearly obvious with the dynamics

of the outbreak," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, during Thursday's briefing, adding, "Even if you're in phase one, two, three, it's not 'OK, game over.'"

Trump also claimed Thursday that the U.S. has "built the most advanced and robust testing anywhere in the world." But the need for more testing remains acute in California, where Newsom has set a goal of about 25,000 coronavirus tests daily by the end of April. Progress on that front appeared to be improving: After 12,200 tests were administered on Tuesday, the governor said around 18,800 tests were conducted on Wednesday, and labs have "substantially addressed" the backlog in test results.

"We'll need to broaden still our testing capacity, broaden still our ability to do community surveillance in this state," Newsom said.

Staff writers John Woolfolk, Harriet Blair Rowan and Kerry Crowley and The Associated Press contributed to this report.