

Coronavirus Death in California Came Weeks Before First Known U.S. Death

The earliest U.S. deaths publicly attributed to the virus had been on Feb. 26, when two people died in the Seattle area. Santa Clara County said an autopsy showed a Feb. 6 death was also related.

By Thomas Fuller and Mike Baker

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SAN FRANCISCO — Officials in Santa Clara County, Calif., announced late Tuesday that two residents there died of the coronavirus in early and mid-February, making them the earliest known victims of the pandemic in the United States. The new information may shift the timeline of the virus's spread in the United States weeks earlier than previously believed.

The county's medical examiner-coroner said that autopsies of two people who died at their homes on Feb. 6 and Feb. 17 showed that the individuals were infected with the virus.

The first publicly known coronavirus-related death in the United States was not reported until Feb. 29 in the Seattle area, although officials there later discovered that two people who had died Feb. 26 also had the virus.

The newly reported deaths suggest that the coronavirus, which first appeared in China, may have been spreading in California much earlier than was previously known, said Dr. Jeffrey V. Smith, the Santa Clara county executive and a medical doctor.

"It was probably around unrecognized for quite some time," Dr. Smith said.

Much debate has centered on the question of when the virus arrived in the United States and how early it began to spread among people. Problems and delays slowed the availability of widespread testing for the virus, which has killed more than 40,000 people nationwide.

In January, the authorities identified a series of coronavirus cases from travelers, but it did not identify any community spread of the virus within the country for several weeks.

Dr. Sara Cody, the chief medical officer of Santa Clara County, said the individuals who died in February did not have any known travel histories that would have exposed them to the virus abroad. They are presumed to have contracted the virus in the community, she said.

"Each one of those deaths is probably the tip of an iceberg of unknown size," Dr. Cody said. "It feels quite significant."

Early this year, local officials around the country were unaware of the virus's apparent spread. The federal government had strict rules on who qualified for coronavirus testing, and test kits developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — that public health labs began receiving on Feb. 7 — turned out to be faulty.

Strict and narrow definitions of who could be tested limited what local health officials could do to find out how widespread the virus might be.

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"We had to ask the C.D.C. every single time: Does this person meet the case definition? May we send a sample?" Dr. Cody said.

"We had this very, very uncomfortable feeling that we were hearing about a lot of patients who really felt that they were cases but we couldn't test," she said.

Other indications have emerged that the virus may have been spreading earlier than previously known. The Grand Princess cruise ship that departed San Francisco on Feb. 11 had passengers who developed the coronavirus on board. Researchers believe that the virus also began to circulate in the New York area by mid-February. And in early March, researchers found a range of cases with genetic similarities to each other in the Seattle area, suggesting that it had been spreading undetected for weeks.

In Santa Clara County, Dr. Cody said the picture of the spread was becoming clearer but there were still gaps.

"We had so few pixels you could hardly pick out the image," she said. "Suddenly we have many pixels that all of sudden that we didn't even realize that we were looking for."

But, she added, “I can’t put the story together yet.”

On March 16, Santa Clara County was among the first counties in the nation to announce stay-at-home orders. “Clearly in retrospect that was a good decision,” Dr. Cody said. “Now we see there was even more transmission than we recognized.”

Although California was an early state to report that individuals were carrying the virus, it has had one-tenth the number of deaths as New York State, the hardest-hit place in America. Officials believe that the early imposition of stay-at-home orders and the state’s lower population density are among factors that have helped California avoid the worst so far.

Thomas Fuller reported from San Francisco and Mike Baker from Seattle.

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- **When will this end?**

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: “How will we know when to reopen the country?” In an [American Enterprise Institute report](#), Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McClellan, Lauren Silvis and Crystal Watson staked out four goal posts for recovery: Hospitals in the state must be able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization, without resorting to crisis standards of care; the state needs to be able to at least test everyone who has symptoms; the state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases and contacts; and there must be a sustained reduction in cases for at least 14 days.

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