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For Immediate Release

SAN FRANCISCO SHIGELLA INCREASE SICKENS HOMELESS AND NON-HOMELESS POPULATION

Sanitation, hand-washing key to prevent spread of gastro-intestinal illness

SAN FRANCISCO (December 26, 2014) – The San Francisco Department of Public Health reports a significant increase in the number of Shigella cases in the city this month, with 65 cases confirmed from December 1 to 23.

Shigella typically occurs in San Francisco at the rate of five to 10 cases per month. Shigella is a bacteria that usually causes diarrhea that lasts a few days. Rarely, it can cause more serious illness. Though most cases are mild, and most people recover on their own without seeking medical care, it is a highly contagious illness that can spread quickly.

San Franciscans can help prevent the spread of Shigella by washing their hands, especially before preparing or serving food, before eating and after using the bathroom.

Among the cases this December, about 40 percent are in people who are known to be homeless.

“We are particularly concerned about our homeless residents, who are more vulnerable to disease than people with stable housing,” said Dr. Tomás Aragón, San Francisco’s Health Officer.

The Health Department’s San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (SFHOT) is working aggressively to provide outreach to the homeless population on the streets. SFHOT staffers are interviewing homeless people for symptoms of Shigella, handing out fliers alerting them to the outbreak, giving instructions on sanitation and hand hygiene and passing out antiseptic towelettes.

The mission of the San Francisco Department of Public Health is to protect and promote the health of all San Franciscans.

We shall ~ Assess and research the health of the community ~ Develop and enforce health policy ~ Prevent disease and injury ~
~ Educate the public and train health care providers ~ Provide quality, comprehensive, culturally-proficient health services ~ Ensure equal access to all ~

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This approach is part SFHOT's new medical model, bringing clinical expertise directly to homeless people living on the street.

"We know where people are -- on the streets, in encampments, in parks," said Dr. Barry Zevin, Medical Director, SFHOT. "We are able to reach them very quickly with expert medical advice, to assess them and provide information about how to prevent and stop the spread of disease."

The Health Department also is working with the city's shelters and soup kitchens to ensure proper sanitation, hand washing facilities and information is made available to clients.

"People who are in crowded conditions and without access to running water and sanitation facilities are more susceptible to contracting and spreading Shigella," Aragón said. "We are working closely with homeless service providers to ensure that this community is reached."

Shigella spreads easily through contact with contaminated surfaces, food handling and improper sanitation. Young children, the elderly and HIV-positive people are more likely to have severe symptoms including dehydration, bacteria in the blood and seizures.

Shigella is most often treated with antibiotics and staying hydrated. The Health Department issued a health alert on December 22 to health care providers outlining the situation and providing testing and treatment information.

The Health Department will continue to track and investigate Shigella cases and will provide updates when there is new information. For more information, go to: www.sfcddcp.org/shigella.html or <http://www.cdc.gov/shigella/>.
