See Leftover Fabric From the AIDS Memorial Quilt Made Into Coronavirus Masks

Volunteers sew the masks for frontline workers serving homeless and underserved communities.

April 20, 2020 By Trent Straube

Sewing can save lives. Staff and volunteers at the AIDS Memorial Quilt are taking leftover fabric and making coronavirus masks to help protect workers serving homeless communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The effort is a collaboration between the National AIDS Memorial, the caretaker of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and Bay Area Community Services (BACS), which provides housing and behavioral health services for people experiencing homelessness and mental health crises. BACS helps more than 8,000 people each year and remains in operation under stay-at-home orders.

Gert McMullin sews masks out of extra fabric from the AIDS Memorial Quilt Courtesy of BACS/Mike Smith

Leading the charge from her sewing machine is Gert McMullin, who has been working on the AIDS Quilt since 1987. “Sewing is how I chose to memorialize my friends I’ve lost to AIDS,” McMullin said in a joint press release from the two Bay Area organizations. “I just can’t sit idly by during this new crisis. Sewing masks for BACS helps me have hope, and I know they need them, and it will make a difference.”

Michael Borgiorni of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and Renee Tripp of BASCCourtesy of BASC/Mike Smith

“We hold closely our responsibility to ensure the story of the AIDS pandemic, and related public health issues remain at the heart of what we do to support our communities, particularly during these difficult times,” added John Cunningham, the executive director of the National AIDS Memorial. “I am so proud of our volunteers who are doing their part to help the heroes on the front line of this pandemic, the health professionals who are risking their lives to save lives.”

BASC team members Loretta Lovett and Jennifer Abarca wear their new masksCourtesy of BASC/Jenny Vasquez

The AIDS Memorial Quilt moved to the Bay Area earlier this year when the National AIDS Memorial became its new steward; previously, the NAMES Project Foundation had cared for the Quilt. The plan was to display the panels in early April, but that has been postponed due to efforts to slow the spread of the new coronavirus.

For more details, read "AIDS Memorial Quilt—All 50,000 Panels—Is Moving to a New Home" and "Massive Display of AIDS Quilt in San Francisco to Be Rescheduled."

For more about McMullin's HIV and COVID-19 advocacy, check out this People profile.

For better protection, a surgical mask can be inserted into the masks sewn by the volunteers; as such, they can also function as a washable cover. To sew your own, view the instructional video below.

To read an op-ed by John Cunningham, executive director of the National AIDS Memorial, about adapting the lessons of AIDS to fight COVID-19, click here.

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