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# County plans for potential flu outbreak

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PLATTSBURGH — Is the North Country ready should a major flu outbreak within the next few years?

Nearly 150 community leaders pondered that question Tuesday during an Influenza Pandemic Summit at Clinton Community College. Representatives from a variety of interests listened as experts described what needs to be done to prepare for a global outbreak.

"This is going to be something that happens," said Dr. Russell Hartung of the CVPH Medical Center's Emergency Department of the potential for a flu outbreak of epic proportions. "The question is not if; the question is when."

A pandemic is a worldwide outbreak that spreads rapidly and impacts nearly everyone.

Since the outbreak typically involves a new viral strain, it causes more severe symptoms with more complications, larger numbers of illnesses and deaths and can affect young and healthy people.

The last pandemic struck in 1968, and officials believe it is only a matter of time before the next one arrives.

With the onset of avian flu in Asia and Europe escalating, some feel the moment is ripe for an outbreak now.

"We need to make plans," said Paula Calkins-Lacombe, executive director of the Clinton County Health Department, as she advised community leaders to think about a pandemic today and not once it hits. "Some of you already have disaster emergency plans, but this is different."

Between 30 and 50 percent of the population could become sick during a pandemic. If a third of the nation came down with the flu, that would leave 90 million Americans sick, and up to 2 million could die from the outbreak.

"The outbreak itself would last six to eight weeks, and the effects would extend well beyond that," Hartung said, noting that "waves of smaller outbreaks" could extend several months following the initial pandemic.

Following those worst-case scenarios, absenteeism at schools and workplaces could exceed 40 percent. Schools and other public gatherings would possibly close to reduce the spread of the disease, and the community's infrastructure would be tested to the limit.

"We need to make sure things continue functioning as best they can," said Rodney Brown, Clinton County planner, as he discussed government's role during a pandemic. "The best role we can play is to make sure they (businesses and other public entities) have all the resources they have every other day.

"The hallmark of Americans is that we come through during a crisis," he added. "Such will be the case in case of a flu pandemic."

Bonnie Black, director of Employee Assistance Services, talked about the need for businesses to take the topic seriously and recognize the impact dramatic absenteeism will have on their workforce.

"When do you start planning? Today. You really need to begin your plan now. It takes time to prepare."

She emphasized the need for business leaders to inform their employees about the flu pandemic, to communicate the steps that will be taken when the pandemic impacts their business and to encourage employees to help prevent spreading the disease by staying home when symptoms arise.

"Take care of your most valuable asset — your employees," she said. "Without them, you don't exist."

Edmund Lydon, assistant vice president of facilities and emergency management at CVPH Medical Center, noted the impact the pandemic would have on health care.

"People need to know what they can do to prevent spreading illness in the hospital, at home and in the community. We need to do a better job to educate the public (on disease prevention) so we can protect people in the hospital."

There is no clear timeline for when the pandemic may develop, but most officials are convinced that it will strike at some time. The best thing communities can do, they say, is to react like it is a certainty.

"People need to stay healthy," Calkins-Lacombe said of the public's best defense against the flu. "We need to do the things that make us healthy — rest, nutrition, exercise, all that stuff we tell you all the time. It will become really important."