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# Mock scenario used to study local response to a major flu outbreak

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- Emergency exercise spans five counties, many departments

By JEFF MEYERS

PLATTSBURGH — What would happen if a major influenza outbreak did occur?

Officials from a wide range of interests and backgrounds tried answering that question Tuesday during a day-long exercise on dealing with a flu pandemic as it spread across the region.

More than 140 people from Clinton, Essex, Franklin, St. Lawrence and Hamilton counties participated.

Representatives from health care, government, education, business and law enforcement participated in the scenario that included a state-of-emergency situation based on an alarming increase in the number of flu-like illnesses during a major snowstorm.

"We have a lot of very educated and talented people here today," said Edmond Lydon, assistant vice president of facilities and emergency management for CVPH Medical Center. "We want to take a look at what we will need to do" in case an actual pandemic strikes the region.

Health-care officials are concerned that a major outbreak is inevitable, particularly with the movement of the virus that causes avian flu in Asia and Europe.

Tuesday's practice was based on a situation in which 5 percent of the tri-county population had come down with flu-like symptoms, with about 40 percent of those seeking medical care at area hospitals.

Coupled with a major snowstorm, officials declared a state of emergency in all three counties on Jan. 12, 2006, precipitating events to help reduce the spread of the disease while offering support for the community.

"CVPH is seeing a surge of 100 patients today," Lydon said of the make-believe situation. "This scenario is going to have a different impact on each agency in the community. The number of ill patients is increasing, but remember that absenteeism is increasing as well."

## **STOP THE PANIC**

The practice, held at Angell College Center at Plattsburgh State, utilized a "players room," where community leaders gathered to discuss their options as new information on the combined storm and health-care emergency developed.

Specific groups — such as law enforcement, education and local government — sat together at tables and reviewed the facts as they received them from a "command center," where details of what was happening were generated.

"It's going to be a large incident that will test how well we can operate with a short staff," said Malcolm Jones, director of emergency management for Franklin County. "It's a real-time situation. We've got to be able to stop any panic and get people to stay in their homes."

At the time of the fictitious outbreak, no actual cases of avian flu in the region had been confirmed, but officials were moving forward on the basis that the increased number of illnesses was indeed due to a major situation.

"As this is happening, resources are very limited," Lydon said. "The question facing us is: How do we deliver services and offer alternative care to people? There are some very challenging ethical questions facing us."

Political leaders will also play a role in helping to keep things under as much control as possible.

"We need to be in the position where we can identify our own resources, make sure we have the staff we need to be ready for this kind of situation," said Bernie Bassett, supervisor for the Town of Plattsburgh, noting that his town will do all it can in a regional effort against a pandemic.

### **MORE BEDS NEEDED**

The region's nursing homes will also play an important role by providing additional bed space for hospitals stretched to the limit because of increasing numbers of ill patients.

"Our biggest issue is labor," said Paul Richards, administrator at Meadowbrook Nursing Home. "We are very labor intensive. We need to be able to respond to a situation where 35 percent of our employees may not show up."

Nursing homes will work together to make sure there is enough support everywhere, and families who can bring their loved ones home during the pandemic will be welcomed to do so, he said.

### **POLICE GET READY**

Law-enforcement officials were on hand to support the practice exercise.

"We haven't had a lot of opportunities to help out with this kind of scenario," said Sgt. Chad Niles, emergency management officer for New York State Police, explaining that until about five years ago law enforcement did not play a significant role in public health-care issues.

"Things are going to be happening very fast (during a pandemic)," he added. "We're going to be short of personnel to begin with, but we are going to have to continue doing our job as expected."

Officials held mock news conferences and released press announcements throughout the day, as if the emergency were really happening.

They will now begin reviewing the event to determine what kinds of improvements need to be made for subsequent practices and — if needed — the real thing.

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### **WEBEXTRA**

To read more about as possible avian flu pandemic, check our WebExtra report at:

[www.pressrepublican.com/birdflu](http://www.pressrepublican.com/birdflu)