

Where Does Pan Flu Emergency Response Plug Into My EOC?

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It's a challenge to speculate exactly how a pandemic influenza will unfold – whether it will be sustained, roll through in waves, be over in a few months or consume our attention for nearly a year. But rest assured, surveillance and detection systems are established and aggressively monitoring avian flu activity, which is the most suspected agent to cause a pandemic outbreak. This is not unlike the role of law enforcement intelligence and data gathering – but instead of humans being monitored, public health epidemiologists are monitoring the avian flu virus and related mutant strains.

Public Health Will Be Lead Agency in Influenza Pandemic

Public health will be the lead agency in an influenza pandemic. Just as the National Hurricane Center serves as the technical resource on tropical storms for local and state emergency management authorities, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will serve as the technical resource for public health. As a result, public health will look to integrate its pandemic flu response through county and municipal government emergency operations. One such approach follows to illustrate how public health emergency actions will assimilate into the county emergency operation center.

Example of Response

The response described represents that for a three-county region with a combined population of 315,000. The largest county serves a year-round population of approximately 200,000 combined with a tourist population that easily adds another 500,000 during peak season. Two other neighboring

counties serve smaller populations, but the approach will be similar.

Emergency Support Function 8

Public health is a support agency for Emergency Support Function 8 (ESF 8) along with hospitals, EMS and county fire/rescue services. In a declared public health emergency (or mass casualty), area hospital systems and public health come together under a unified medical command. In the early phases of the pandemic or even pre-pandemic, state infectious disease consultants and public health authorities will be in conference calls with CDC to assess data (both individual cases and clusters of flu activity) and recommend either cautious or aggressive courses of action. This analysis will include local representatives of the unified medical command (UMC) group. Once available data is understood and discussed, and actions agreed upon, the UMC will recommend a course of action that will represent that of ESF 8.

The UMC will brief the EOC policy group on the suggested course of action. The policy group must consider the full impact on its community in the context of the local economy, school closings and the ability to deploy first responder resources in response to emerging local conditions. From this analysis will come the course of action for a particular municipality or county, which may include any number of recommendations, including voluntary calls for self-quarantine, public health orders for isolation and/or quarantine of individuals or groups, cancellation of social events or festivals and/or closing of shopping malls.

The briefing for the policy group will include discussion of limited

availability of vaccines and/or the availability of anti-viral drugs, along with the eligible priority groups. First responder clinics may be held separately from public clinics but with all secured by law enforcement.

Once the policy group has reviewed the recommendations, the report will be integrated into the community's overall response effort, which includes other emergency support functions such as law enforcement, mass care, etc. The policy group will confirm the course of action based on the information available, and at its preset EOC briefing of ESFs, will share the plan of action for the current operational period.

Communicating With the Public

Consequently, a daily news conference is conducted to tap media sources and convey plan details to the public. The news conference will share closings, reinforce self-help tips or acknowledge availability of either critical vaccines or anti-viral medications. Public health authorities have recognized that given today's timeline for bringing vaccines and a reservoir of anti-virals online, information may be the only resource that will be plentiful. It must be administered quickly – and lots of it!

For Additional Information

For additional information on getting your EOC ready for pandemic influenza, see the March 2006 edition of *Homeland Protection Professional's* Situation Report Guest Commentary by Tom Russo, or contact the author at russotp@dhec.sc.gov.