

Local Responsibility

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The purpose of this review is to provide a framework for discussion among local government managers and officials regarding preparedness for a pandemic flu. The paper will merely raise issues and present possible strategies based on one small county's – Schenectady County, with 146,000 people -- current planning efforts.

Schenectady County is taking a coordinated approach to planning for pandemic flu – a global outbreak of a novel strain of influenza with efficient human-to-human transmission. The county, lead by the County Public Health Department, in concert with the county's interdepartmental Emergency Management Steering Committee, is developing an ever-evolving pandemic plan to complement and supplement the county's emergency operations plan and emergency declaration system.

The county's effort began in 2005, and involves numerous county agencies, key health care providers, municipalities, school districts, first responders, law enforcement agencies, and business community. By no means is planning complete. It is ongoing, evolving, and ever changing in response to increased knowledge of local players and emerging strategies at the state, federal, and global levels.

The following quote from Secretary Leavitt, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, expresses very succinctly how important it is for localities to prepare. The cavalry is not coming.

“Let's acknowledge that anything we say before a pandemic occurs feels like an exaggeration, feels alarmist. But anything said afterward, it shows a lot of preparation....Is this Y2K all over again? Is this crying wolf? This pandemic will happen with certainty. We don't know if H5N1 is the spark... in 1918 they had no idea what was coming... We are overdue, and ill prepared. Local communities are going to have to take the lead. Those expecting the federal government to ride in and come to their rescue are going to be sorely disappointed.”

Goals of Local Preparedness

The key goals to be kept in mind during a pandemic include:

- Optimally limit deaths/sickness.
- Maintain continuity of essential services: food, shelter, water, communications, fuel.
- Keep residents informed, prevent panic and develop a community understanding of the importance of personal preparedness and responsibility.

- Attempt to limit economic losses.

Local planning and preparation must be taking place at a multiple of levels and in multiple ways. The following outline presents a very simplistic overview of the types of thinking, planning, decision making, and actions that should be taking place in all localities.

Community Leadership Preparedness

Never before have communities been faced with possibility of knowing a pandemic may happen. In previous pandemics, the clinical modeling and the international surveillance systems were not in place to provide the opportunity to undertake prospective planning. Leaders beyond public health officials need to develop a working knowledge of the pandemic flu and its local implications. This understanding must include:

Basic clinical understanding of pandemic flu:

- How is this different from the normal flu season?
- What could the symptoms look like?
- How many people could be infected, need medical treatment, need hospitalization, or could die? What are the factors that we need to watch that help us estimate those numbers?
- Understanding that in all likelihood there will be no vaccine in the first wave of a pandemic.
- Understanding that localities must therefore plan for a scenario with no vaccine but must also prepare for vaccine distribution for a likely second wave.

Understanding of the factors that will impact the types and levels of decisions to be made. For example, it is critical for local leaders to ask:

- How would the level of lethality/severity of the strain of the flu impact our local response? In other words, what is the death rate?
- How would the rate of transmission impact on our local response?
- How would the rate of infection impact on our local response?
- What responsibility do I have in this scenario and what is the responsibility of others and are they taking the necessary planning steps?
- What is the role of the federal government? What expectations can we have of them?
- What is the role of the state? What expectations can we have of them in a pandemic?
- What is the role of the locality/county/public health unit?
- Who has what legal authority to quarantine people? What legal measures can be taken to declare an emergency and under what conditions would we activate various responses?

What legal tools exist to quarantine and contain the spread of the disease?

- Develop a series of strategies to implement social distancing and declarations of emergency necessary to contain the spread. The timing on these actions is critical to impact outcomes. There will not be time to debate issues.

Communities need to act at the appropriate time. A number of strategies are available at varying levels of severity. Each strategy results in its own set of implications which must also then be addressed. Examples include:

- Closing schools and child care centers.
- Prohibiting mass gatherings.
- Declaration of an emergency and limiting movement for emergency and critical services only.
- Encourage businesses to implement emergency staffing plans to maintain critical functions but maximize use of telecommunicating, working from home, etc.
- Municipal lawyers must be aware and on board with potential actions that would have to be taken at the local level.
- Key leaders in the community must understand the potential severity and the potential necessity to take emergency actions to deal with extraordinary conditions and to save lives.
- What are the key activities that local public health, the health care system, and others need to be planning for?

Health and Medical Response Systems Capacity Building

Local public health officials should be working closely with health care system. In Schenectady County a Health Systems Response Committee was established to address the critical health infrastructure issues that would exist in the face of a pandemic.

The following are the types of activities/discussion that should be considered:

- Hospitals should establish separate triage areas for persons presenting with possible influenza, fever, or respiratory disease.
- Coordination between and among health care providers to identify specific facilities in different geographic areas to serve as flu clinics
- Public health with health care system to provide a 24-7 telephone consulting nurse service to provide information and advice to ill persons regarding illness and access to health care. In Schenectady County, phase one of this preparedness included the installation of a new phone system that will enable us within hours to convert a section of the county phone system into a call center.
- Identify what are surge need scenarios based on rates of infection and severity of illness assumptions. A number of communities are modeling scenarios for their community based on low, medium, and high pandemic scenarios. Model the number of residents in need of health care, hospitalizations, etc.
- Identify and develop enhanced surge capacity. Consider the following:

- Assess total number of beds on line currently and current occupancy rates
- Implement protocols to expand internal hospital bed capacity.
- Need to assess staffing issues to determine surge capacity
 - Surge capacity will require more staff
 - % of staff will be out sick/call in
 - Will there be prophylactic anti-virals for health care workers?
- Develop non-traditional staffing options: volunteer medical corp.
- Develop protocols to discharge non-critical patients.
- Identify alternate levels of care for infected individuals

Local Emergency Operations and Public Health Operations Command System

It is imperative that localities pre-establish Emergency Operations Center protocols and local Public Health Operations command system and center for a pandemic. This scenario presents a relatively novel set of circumstances that will require a non-traditional team for command systems

Resource Issues

The following key issues should be addressed in local planning

Anti-virals

- Calculation of the number of treatment regimens your locality will receive from the federal and state stockpile systems. The federal government has identified the number it is recommending purchasing over the next two years.
- What is the state and local plan for distribution of the treatment regimens under the crisis scenario? How will the distribution system work? Will it be through local health departments or through key health providers? What is the security system, etc?
- Are any emergency response and health care providers considering stockpiling anti-virals for prophylactic purposes for their workers?

Personal Protective Equipment

- Does your health care and emergency response community have the necessary personal protective equipment?

Medical Equipment

- What is the inventory of ventilators in your community?
- Are there any plans to increase the inventory?

Training/Exercising/Drilling Preparedness

Local public health departments are conducting variety of planning, training, exercising and drills relative to components of pandemic flu preparedness. Examples include but are not limited to:

- Storage, security, and distribution of flu vaccine in timely, safe, and orderly manner.
- Training and drills relative to quarantine/containment strategies.
- Training, exercising, and drills on illness surges with full continuum of health care providers; particularly the hospitals.
- Train and drill on activation of both countywide Emergency Operations Center and public health operations center.
- **NIMS Training** – all disciplines and public and private sector should be using same incident management model.

Communication

- Develop public education and communications to keep the public informed. Call center, website, and community presentations.
- Media partnership.
- Business partnership.

Local Corrections Planning

Local jails present unique and complex issues that must be addressed by corrections, public health, law enforcement, and the court system. In Schenectady County we have requested and convened a high-level state meeting including the State Office of Court Administration and the State Health Department to develop strategies to deal with this very critical issue.

Essential Services and Continuity of Government

Localities must begin to plan to assure that essential services can continue. Local government continuity planning issues: prioritize critical functions and identify staff needed to maintain critical infrastructure services with possibility of 30% of staff absence: e.g. cross-training; alternative work schedules; large-scale telecommuting. Not only does local government need to address the primary issues of the crisis but it must also assure that services continue: water, sewer, power, health care, fire, police, emergency response, and food/shelter. Planning should include such areas as:

- Identify critical functions and processes.
- Identify positions needed to carry out critical functions.
- Identify staff that can be cross trained to backfill critical functions.
- Identify functions that can be performed via telecommuting.
- Identify department's technology needs related to large scale telecommuting and

- conference calling.
- Identify functions that can be suspended.
- Determine whether critical functions can be performed through flexing.
- Review HR policies re: flexing.
- Promote education campaigns.
- Make alcohol hand gel and disinfectant wipes available and accessible to all staff.
- Develop internal communication mechanisms (i.e. phone tree).

Additional Strategies

- Engage local businesses: stimulate and support business continuity planning (ill-prepared businesses may be forced to suspend operations due to *enhanced* risk of disease transmission).
- Basic and social services support: prepare to provide basic support for large numbers of homebound individuals; provision of critical infrastructure services (e.g. transportation).
- Social disruption: Consider community consequences and response (e.g. for school closures – what happens with single parents with children and no one to watch children?).
- Infection control: Ensure adequate hand washing supplies for all employees and in every public building; consider availability of masks.
- Mental health: Prepare for emotional and mental health aspects of a pandemic.
- Mass Fatalities: Work with local funeral directors and others to ensure appropriate arrangements and agreements in place to handle larger than normal number of bodies.

About the Symposium

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