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LESSON LEARNED

Public Health Emergency Planning: Incorporating Triggers into Plans to Guide Decision Making

SUMMARY

Public health emergency planners should consider incorporating triggers for declaring a public health emergency into plans to help guide decision making.

DESCRIPTION

In October and November of 2007, the state of Washington conducted a multi-agency full-scale exercise (FSE). The FSE included 2,500 players from 35 federal, state, local, and tribal agencies. It simulated a *Salmonella typhi* outbreak deliberately introduced into the Washington region through tainted communion wafers. The objective of the FSE was to test the participating agencies' abilities to detect, respond to, and recover from a bioterrorism event. One of the primary goals of the FSE was to test the ability of the local health officers (LHO) to respond effectively to an outbreak. According to the exercise plan, the LHOs were expected to declare a public health emergency, to request a county emergency declaration, and to request that their counties activate their emergency operations centers.

The Washington State Annual Bioterrorism Exercise – Region 9 (WASABE 9) is conducted annually by the state of Washington to test the state's preparedness for a bioterrorism incident.

During the FSE, a number of LHOs hesitated about whether to declare a public health emergency, and several failed to do so. Although the LHOs were aware of the *Salmonella* outbreaks, several were uncertain as to whether the incidents rose to the level of a "significant" public health event that would require the declaration of a public health emergency. According to the WASABE 9 after-action report (AAR), this uncertainty was "due to a lack of definable triggers" in the emergency plans used by health officials. To remedy this problem, the AAR recommended that emergency planners incorporate triggers into their plans to "help guide the decision to declare a public health emergency."

Public health emergency planners should consider incorporating triggers for declaring a public health emergency into plans to help guide decision making.

CITATION

Washington State Department of Health. *Washington State Annual Bioterrorism Exercise – Region 9 (WASABE 9) After Action Report*. 31 Dec 2007.
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=30826>

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