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LESSON LEARNED

Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Establishing Clear Guidance for School Closures

SUMMARY

State public health and education departments should collaborate to establish clear plans and policy guidance regarding school closure recommendations during a pandemic influenza outbreak.

DESCRIPTION

The Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH)/Office of Public Health (OPH) sponsored a series of pandemic influenza tabletop exercises (TTX) throughout the state from December 2006 to February 2007. On December 5, 2006, the OPH Center for Community Preparedness conducted a TTX in Lake Charles, Louisiana. TTX participants represented 5 state organizations, and 20 regional and local organizations. The goal of the TTX was to engage community partners in a discussion of Emergency Support Function (ESF)-8 (public health and emergency medical) roles and responsibilities, expectations, and risk communications in the face of an influenza pandemic. One TTX objective was to assess the familiarity of pandemic influenza planning among internal (ESF-8) and external stakeholders. The TTX scenario consisted of a severe influenza pandemic emerging in OPH Region V.

Region V

Louisiana's Office of Public Health Region V is located in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and includes the parishes of Allen, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, and Jefferson Davis.

During the TTX, participants observed that there was no plan or policy guidance for school closure recommendations. As the scenario unfolded and the pandemic outbreak entered its third week, a participant representing a local university noted that university events would continue as scheduled, even though DHH/OPH had recommended minimizing the number of large gatherings in the region. According to the TTX after-action report (AAR), the lack of a clear policy contributed to differing views among participants about the legal foundations for school closure decisions. The AAR recommended that DHH, the Louisiana Department of Education, and the Board of Regents clarify the policy and legal dimensions of school closures. This includes clarifying the difference between "recommending" and "ordering" schools to close. Once these issues have been addressed, they should be codified in emergency management plans.

State public health and education departments should collaborate to establish clear plans and policy guidance regarding school closure recommendations during a pandemic influenza outbreak.

CITATION

Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, Louisiana Office of Public Health. *Pandemic Influenza External Tabletop Exercise Program After-Action Reports*. 26 Feb 2007.
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=26393>

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