



Thursday, May 4th, 2006

Make This Your H

- FRONT PAGE
- LOCAL NEWS
- OPINIONS
- OBITUARIES
- COLUMNS
- CALENDAR
- LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
- NATIONAL NEWS
- CLASSIFIEDS

News



Health, community officials discuss how to prepare for flu pandemic

by Davin White STAFF WRITER
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MORGANTOWN — In calling various sectors of the community to action, regional organizers say a strong, local response to possible pandemic flu is necessary to avert a chaotic outcome.

Leaders throughout North Central West Virginia met at Morgantown's Radisson Hotel Monday to address the possible effects of avian influenza, or another type of pandemic flu, on the region.

Attendees said an important aspect of the regional summit, "Preparing West Virginia for Pandemic Influenza," was bringing non-traditional players to the table.

Harrison-Clarksburg Health Department Administrator Chad Bundy said it's essential to bring those uncommon partners — like educators and businesses — into the loop.

"We've had a great turnout," Bundy said Monday, "a very diverse group."

He praised Harrison County hospital, law enforcement, education and health officials for participating.

If a pandemic flu affects 40 percent of the region's work force, as has been projected, businesses, the agricultural industry, educators and others need to develop a plan, attendees said.

The po-tential scenarios loom large, according to Bundy and others. If a worker is taking care of an ill family member, for instance, "your potential for contracting it will increase greatly," Bundy said.

It's been figured that a vaccine for the avian flu could take three to six months to culture, he noted. And if a pandemic breaks out regionally, there's "nowhere you can really run or hide — it's everywhere," Bundy said.

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Market Watch



Index	Last Trade	Change
NASDAQ	2318.59	14.62
SP 500	1310.73	2.88
Russ 2000	770.24	2.51
AMEX	2008.58	7.58
NYSE	8513.37	16.14
30 YR BOND	52.36	0.00

May 4, 2006 1:31 PM ET
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"From an educational perspective, we're very concerned," said Harrison County Superintendent Carl Friebe, who attended the summit.

In the event that 40 percent of employees and 40 percent of the work force are out, "closing of the schools is inevitable," he said.

The regional summit helps to flag the other entities a school system can work with when developing a plan, he said.

The system's response to a pandemic will go "beyond what we're doing already," Friebe said.

Monday's summit is not just a response to a possible pandemic flu, but to "all hazards," said Mark Fischer, project manager for the Virtual Medical Campus/Homeland Security Programs at West Virginia University.

In a world of bioterrorism, "emergency planning is emergency planning," he said.

Fischer encouraged an audience of hundreds to step up and lead local, community-based efforts in planning for disaster preparedness.

"Let's plan for it. Don't wait," Fischer said. "We have to step up as leaders."

Coordinated efforts should be handled at "the lowest levels first," he said.

As part of a panel discussion, Gary Price, administrative assistant of Marion County Schools, said school systems are capable of providing emergency transportation, in the form of buses, in the event of a disaster.

Among others, Price mentioned the lessons learned following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. School buses that perhaps could've been used for emergency transportation sat idle and flooded, he noted.

"We can be very efficient and very well-organized," he said.

And businesses will need to consider "essential" and "non-essential" functions and cross-train staff because the workforce may take a heavy hit over weeks or even months during a pandemic, said Barbara Parsons, director of education services for Monongalia Health System.

Fred Conley, health officer for the Preston County Health Department, echoed Fischer in saying that communities cannot afford the luxury of complacency when preparing for pandemic flu. Planning ahead is a necessity.

"Complacency breeds fear; and fear breeds chaos," he said.

Fears of the avian, or bird flu, have spread in recent months as birds affected with the deadly H5N1 strain have been found in European countries, Africa and elsewhere. The first cases were seen in Southeast Asia.

It is highly contagious among birds and often deadly to the animals, according to the Centers for Disease Control's Web site.

According to the site, the spread of H5N1 virus from human to human is rare and has not continued beyond one person.

Most human cases have occurred from direct or close contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces, according to the CDC.

Scientists fear, however, the virus could mutate and easily spread from person to person, the site notes. Since the virus does not commonly affect humans, there is little or no immunity to it.

A big concern, some health officials have said, is what we cannot control — like migratory birds.

H5N1 has been fatal in more than half the humans it's affected, CDC reports.

Those interested in learning more about an emergency/threat preparedness plan can stop by the Board of Health's office on West Main Street in Clarksburg for information, Bundy said.

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