Community Organizations Partner With DCHHS for Pre-Disaster Training

DCHHS Public Health Preparedness Division held its first “Partners in Preparedness” meeting, which included representatives from Dallas County Homeland Security; Emergency Management for the cities of Grand Prairie, Mesquite, Garland and Richardson; representatives from homeless and women’s shelters and other organizations advocating for those groups.

The Partners in Preparedness program fosters partnerships with public and private organizations that work directly with people who are the most at risk for being affected by a disaster. These populations include the homeless (or those without a permanent residence), the deaf/hard-of-hearing, low-income individuals and families, the visually impaired and the elderly, to name a few.

The meeting, held in January, created an open discussion for Public Health and Emergency Management officials to learn from people who work directly with the homeless and temporarily displaced about their unique needs and concerns. This information enables the PHP Division as well as city and county emergency managers to tailor emergency response plans to address the special needs of this group. It also creates an invaluable opportunity for DCHHS to establish long-term relationships and information sharing with these organizations.

The main topics of the meeting involved determining the best methods of disseminating information to the homeless and those without a permanent residence and how to train and educate these groups about the importance of emergency preparedness.

“There were some great suggestions proposed by the group when we talked about the best way to notify this particular population of an emergency such as a tornado or a disease outbreak,” said Emily Gore, public health manager for the PHP Division.

“Several shelters said a majority of their clients had access to cell phones and the emergency managers offered to help get those people signed up for their jurisdiction’s emergency notification system. There was a lot of good dialogue going on,” Gore added.

The PHP Division public health educators visited shelters throughout February to train and educate shelter clients on preparing an emergency supply kit, developing an emergency plan and creating an emergency communications plan.

The next Partners in Preparedness meeting in March will address the unique needs of children before, during and after a disaster.
The PHP Division conducted a Bioterrorism response drill at the DCHHS office. Project Drive-Thru tested the division’s updated First Responder Mass Prophylaxis Plan, which details how DCHHS provides vital medications to first responders in the event of the release of a biological agent.

Although procedures exist for a wide-range of threats, this plan addresses challenges relevant to anthrax, plague or tularemia – pathogens associated with high mortality and the greatest potential for impact on public health.

The First Responder Mass Prophylaxis Plan provides first-line therapy for responders in order to maintain essential operations during a public health emergency.

Through this plan, all first responders within Dallas County receive a two-day supply of medications while requests for additional medications and supplies are made through the Strategic National Stockpile, a CDC-controlled program.

As part of its preparedness initiatives, DCHHS maintains a large cache of antibiotics earmarked specifically for first responders should they be needed. Project Drive-Thru, held in December 2012, simulated the assembly of medication kits from the cache for first responder agencies, the notification of those agencies, the setup of a Drive-Thru POD and the successful transfer of kits to first responder agencies in record time.

PHP staff also tested their new auto-dialer mass notification system’s ability to notify first responder agencies to pick up their medications. The Dallas County Security department participated in the exercise providing security and traffic control, just as they would in a real event.

At the drill, the PHP Division tested a new approach by using a drive-thru model for mass prophylaxis operations (similar to something you might see at a fast food restaurant or bank).

“I think it went rather well,” said Howard Hamilton, logistics section chief for the exercise. “The pre-packaging of assets was extremely helpful.”

Dallas County Security Chief Jason Downing assembled a team of officers to provide security, maintain an identification checkpoint and control traffic while PHP staff performed the roles of first responder liaisons coming to pick up their kits.

Emily Gore, public health manager for the PHP Division, noted that the drill enabled the team to setup and activate the Drive-Thru POD faster, cutting response time from six to three hours, an important difference in a real event.

Once modifications are made to the plan based on lessons learned in the exercise, the PHP Division will invite first responder agencies throughout the county to participate in a future First Responder Mass Prophylaxis Plan.
Dr. Isaac Weisfuse Discusses Smallpox Countermeasures

The Public Health Preparedness Division and Communicable Disease nurses were privileged to hear a presentation on Smallpox Countermeasures by Dr. Isaac Weisfuse February 5. Dr. Weisfuse is currently vice president of Science Policy for SIGA Technologies, a company that specializes in developing therapeutic solutions for lethal pathogens such as smallpox, Ebola, dengue, Lassa fever and other dangerous viruses. Previously, Dr. Weisfuse spent 25 years with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, most recently serving as deputy commissioner of the Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response.

Dr. Weisfuse reviewed the Smallpox Countermeasure Plans developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2003. During his presentation, he discussed issues such as isolation, quarantine and mass vaccination. He also gave examples of challenges in implementing these plans.

A new antiviral medication to treat victims of smallpox, Arestvyr, is under development by SIGA. Arestvyr is an investigational product, not yet approved by the FDA and not commercially available. However, due to its proven ability to be an effective treatment for poxviruses in animals, plans are in place for two million doses to be delivered to the Strategic National Stockpile for possible use in a declared emergency.

The World Health Organization officially declared smallpox to be eradicated in 1980, but the threat still exists for an accidental or deliberate release of the virus.

As an added bonus, Dr. Weisfuse answered questions about the role of public health in New York City during the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, during which he served as Incident Commander for the public health response.

DCHHS Received Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day Resolution From County Commissioners

In recognition of National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, February 7, DCHHS received a Resolution from the Dallas County Commissioners Court.

In honor of the day, DCHHS offered free HIV testing at
- DCHHS,
- Valley View Mall and
- El Centro College.

National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, a national HIV testing and treatment community mobilization initiative, marks its 13th anniversary this year.

“Residents had multiple opportunities to get tested for free,” said Zachary Thompson, DCHHS director. “Knowing your HIV status is a great benefit to individuals and to our community as a whole. Having this knowledge allows people to make better decisions about their health in the future.”
Dallas County Commissioners Court Recognizes DCHHS Immunization Division For Flu Response

The Dallas County Commissioners Court honored the DCHHS Immunization Division and the Dallas County Security department with a resolution for their work promoting and protecting health and safety during the 2012-2013 flu season. The resolution, announced at the February Commissioners Court meeting, recognized DCHHS for maintaining “unwavering commitment to the health, safety and well-being of Dallas County residents.”

The 2012-2013 flu season began earlier than normal and peaked with three pediatric deaths in Dallas County. Residents were urged to acquire a flu vaccine, which prompted the Department to hold flu shot clinics throughout the county. DCHHS ultimately requested permission from the state to offer vaccines to residents who were not Medicaid recipients making the flu shot available to anyone who desired it.

The quick response time of the DCHHS Immunization department helped meet the large demand of those seeking flu vaccines. Commissioners commended DCHHS for its commitment, professionalism and service during the flu season.