

Disaster Response: Public Health's Role

One of Polk County Health Department's roles is to "respond to disasters and assist communities in recovery". Since September 11, 2001 all of us think differently about disaster response. The anthrax outbreak in October, 2001 changed public health's role and visibility as well.

Polk County Health Department has been actively involved in disaster response planning at the local, regional and state levels. A key planning principle for disaster response planning is to build on your day to day activities, strengths and partnerships.

The Health Department's capacity to act is dependent on the strength of our partnerships and our collaborative relationships in the community. Our partnership with medical professionals is critical.

The Health Department has 6 key disaster response roles:

- 1. Monitor conditions, factors and variables to determine if an outbreak has occurred.**

Disease outbreaks do not have a clearly identified (at least at first) incident site. Instead, people appear at doctors' offices, hospital emergency rooms, clinics and pharmacies showing signs and symptoms.

The Polk County Multi Hazard Emergency Operations Plan assigns public health the responsibility of early detection of illness in bioterrorism events. Tradition surveillance will continue to operate as it has for many years. The design, coordination and implementation of enhanced surveillance activities will be developed in partnership with our community and state partners.

Public health surveillance is the ongoing, systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of health data essential to the planning and implementation of public health practice closely integrated with the timely dissemination of these data to those who needed to know.

The object of surveillance in a disaster is to obtain information required for making decisions. The specific information required will vary from disaster to disaster, but a basic three-step process includes: 1) collection of data; 2) analysis of data; and 3) response to data. To increase our capacity, the Health Department is purchasing a web-based, early-detection syndromic surveillance system called First Watch

Successful surveillance system requires an on-going communication partnership between public health and medical professionals. It is public health's responsibility to make sure physicians know what to look for, what needs to be reported and who it needs to be reported to. It is the physician's responsibility to report immediately what they see or suspect. To assist physicians, Polk County Health Department developed the enclosed "notification card" so public health could be notified, right away, 24/7.

2. Help determine the source or origin of an outbreak

While there may not be an incident scene or site, outbreaks have a source. Epidemiology is the study of populations in order to determine the frequency and distribution of diseases and measure risks to that population. An epidemiologic investigation utilizes a methodical and evidence-based approach to determine the extent and progression of any disease outbreak and arrive at conclusions and determinations strictly through a scientific process. It is

public health's responsibility to "connect the dots" and determine the source/cause outbreak.

3. Limit and control the spread of any outbreak

Once the disease has been confirmed, public health will initiate a number of steps and strategies to minimize the number of people who get ill. Among these possible steps are: isolation, quarantine and organizing mass prophylaxis clinics.

4. Provide public education and information

Communicating health risk information, in clear language to non scientific audiences is part of public health's ongoing responsibility. In a time of heightened anxiety and fear, people need clear consistent messages about who is at risk, what they are at risk for and how to minimize that risk. It is public health's responsibility to develop and communicate that message.

5. Help minimize mental stress and anxiety.

In partnership with the Red Cross, the Health Department will organize: Mass mental health clinics for the general public seeking reassurance, support and referral; Reassurance and support centers within mass dispensing clinics; A 24-hour Hotline to provide general information regarding the event or incident and reassurance, support and referral.

6. Help assess long term consequences of a disaster.

As we have learned since the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11th attacks, all the consequences are not known until long after the incident. It is part of public health's responsibility to gather, at the time of the incident/outbreak, valuable information about and from all

affected and/or exposed people to track their long term health consequences.

These roles are not the only roles public health would play in responding to a disaster. However, the community will expect us to provide leadership in these areas. We will be the first responders.