

COMMISSIONER'S CORNER  
**Emergency Response and Preparedness in  
Westchester County – Strategies for Success**

*Joshua Lipsman, M.D., M.P.H. Commissioner of Health  
Alyse Portera, M.S., Deputy Commissioner*

The recent spate of hurricane-related disasters in the Gulf Coast region has highlighted the importance of coordination of efforts between first-responder agencies and public health systems in order to ensure the safety and welfare of the public in times of crisis. Failures in planning that result in injury or death particularly serve to galvanize the public's interest in the emergency preparedness and readiness activities of government agencies at all levels. They help to focus attention and resources on the need to maintain an adequately funded and trained public health infrastructure. Yet despite these recent events and just four years after September 11<sup>th</sup>, funding for this most critical issue is already in jeopardy of being cut by the federal government, making the need to ensure an effective program of readiness in the face of dwindling resources all the more pressing.

The Westchester County Department of Health employs an "All-Hazards" approach to emergency response, drawing on a tool box of techniques to effectively respond to emerging public health threats. Using multi-pronged response strategies for emergency preparedness allows for a tailored response that addresses the immediate aspects of an emerging issue such as SARS or avian flu, as well as less exotic occurrences such as ice storms. The ultimate success of this strategy depends upon the ability to develop and effectively utilize five basic components. These are:

- Epidemiologic surveillance capability
- Timely mass care response
- Adequate public health infrastructure
- Support by community partners
- Communications with lay and professional audiences in an emergency.

Over the past three years, the Westchester County Health Department has developed and refined its Community Health Electronic Syndromic Surveillance System (CHESS), which is an automated syndromic surveillance program. The program subjects data drawn from hospitals and outpatient providers to sophisticated regression analysis to proactively determine emerging disease patterns among the population. This provides the clinical community with an "early warning system" that could potentially identify emerging epidemiologic trends, such as a flu outbreak, days before such patterns could be seen using more traditional reporting techniques. The Health Department's Public Health Response Teams are trained to investigate cases and initiate disease control activities in order to prevent the further spread of disease.

In the event of an outbreak, the Health Department has the ability to quickly mobilize mass care response sites, known as POD (Point of Distribution) or POV (Point of Vaccination) throughout Westchester County. Depending on the extent of an outbreak, assistance might be sought from a trained cadre of both lay and clinical professionals who have completed training through the Westchester Emergency Volunteer Reserves (WEVRs) and Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), respectively. Should conditions war-

*(Continued on next page)*

**Commissioner's Corner...** *(continued from previous page)*

rant, the Westchester County Commissioner of Health also has the authority to issue isolation and quarantine orders in order to ensure the continued health and safety of the public.

Another key element of the County's emergency preparedness is ensuring that public health staff are properly equipped and trained to respond in the event of a public health emergency. This includes equipping hospitals and first responders with alternate communications modalities in the event that landlines are unavailable and cellular systems become overwhelmed. Public health staff must also possess the core competencies which will allow them to function effectively in an emergency response role. Standard core emergency preparedness competencies for public health workers have been developed by the Centers for Disease Control and serve as guidelines for appropriate training and readiness activities that will ensure public health staff possess the combination of knowledge, skills and abilities that are critical to the effective and efficient functioning of the organization. In order to accomplish this, the Health Department engages in a program of ongoing training that involves staff in live drills as well as in tabletop simulation exercises with other response partners at the local, regional and state levels. Constant readiness requires continuous training. This training also focuses on the ability of the individual to respond by providing training on crisis communication techniques and how to deal with the "worried well," as well as how to develop a family emergency readiness plan, thus helping staff to be more effective responders.

Finally, one of the most critical aspects of emergency planning is the ability to sustain a response, which might have to continue over an extended period of time, as seen during the hurricanes in the Gulf Coast. This can be accomplished by reaching out to community-based organizations to develop coordinated and targeted response strategies that can supplement the traditional response mechanisms. Examples of such collaborative efforts with community-based partners include plans to enhance surge capacity; share readiness plans; implement joint training activities; provide supplemental staffing resources; provide targeted training and information to vulnerable populations; and even address the needs of pet owners to help locate facilities that may have excess capacity for emergency pet sheltering.

As we have all become aware, effective emergency preparedness is the result of a well-practiced collaborative effort that must involve not only all levels of government but community-based organizations as well. Physicians in the County are strongly encouraged to participate in this effort by considering joining the Westchester County Medical Reserve Corps. An extensive pool of trained responders is the cornerstone of emergency preparedness. Information on the Medical Reserve Corps can be found on the Physician's Corner page of the Westchester County Health Department's website at <http://www.westchestergov.com/health/physicianscor.htm>. Physicians are also encouraged to bookmark the Physician's Corner page and routinely check the page for updates on developing public health situations.

The Westchester County Department of Health is committed to a program of readiness in conjunction with community partners and key stakeholders in order to ensure the health and well-being of the residents of Westchester County. ♦