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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 25, 2003

WESTCHESTER COUNTY PREPARED TO HANDLE SARS CASES
Health Commissioner Outlines County Response Plan

With cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) continuing to rise globally, Westchester County is responding to SARS with an aggressive campaign.

“We are making every effort to prevent and to prepare for an outbreak of SARS in Westchester County,” said County Executive Andy Spano. “Our Health Department is gearing up to respond to whatever needs arise in our community.”

“As Commissioner of Health for Westchester County, I want to assure residents that the Health Department is working diligently to avert the possibility of a SARS outbreak in Westchester County, or, in the event of an outbreak, to respond to it,” stated Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Westchester County Commissioner of Health. “The key components of the Health Department’s program in response to SARS are education, monitoring, and control,” he said.

EDUCATION

Updated information about SARS and its prevention is being made available to the public through fact sheets and through the Health Department website, www.westchestergov.com/health. Up-to-the-minute information for physicians is provided through Public Health Updates that are being faxed as information becomes available to emergency room physicians, infection control nurses, laboratories, and large group physician practices. Through the Physician's Corner on the department's website, physicians can receive the latest updates on SARS and link to other national and state resources with information on the topic.

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MONITORING

A new computerized system developed by the county health department specifically to respond to emerging public health threats receives and analyzes data from hospital emergency rooms on a daily basis and triggers alerts when unusual levels or clusters of illness are identified. Health Department staff then follow up on any unusual findings. Recently, the department added two more hospitals to its surveillance network, now covering in total more than 50% of the County's emergency room visits. In addition, health department staff are in daily communication with hospital emergency room staff to ensure early identification of persons who may have certain types of illnesses, including respiratory diseases.

CONTROL AND RESPONSE

The health department is taking the following control measures to prevent an outbreak of SARS in our area:

- A health advisory for arriving travelers is currently being distributed to all airline passengers at the County Airport.
- The County's outbound emergency calling system is being placed into a state of readiness to make phone calls relaying pertinent SARS information.
- Libraries, senior centers, parks, schools and other community groups are being contacted to assist the County in getting SARS information out to the public and are being provided with fact sheets about SARS.
- Plans are being made to staff a SARS Hotline in the event the need for such a service arises.

For more information, visit the Health Department's website at www.westchestergov.com/health or call the Health Department at (914) 813-5000.

Until an effective treatment is established for SARS, the control of SARS depends on traditional public health measures. Residents who are experiencing symptoms and have a travel history to countries reporting SARS should contact their physicians. Physicians should notify the Westchester County Department of Health regarding any patients whom they suspect of having SARS. Fit-tested respirators have been recommended by the State Health Department for emergency and health care workers who may come in contact with patients at risk for SARS. The Department of Emergency Services and the Department of Health are working together

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with dispatchers, emergency medical services and hospitals to ensure that appropriate infection control measures are taken.

“The Health Department’s disease surveillance and monitoring capability has been dramatically expanded in recent years through enhancements to electronic data management and improved communications to and with health care providers throughout the public health system,” said Dr. Lipsman. “Given our extensive experience in responding to emerging diseases such as West Nile Virus, we are prepared to conduct aggressive and effective control measures with regards to SARS, should the need arise,” he added.

SARS is a newly emerging respiratory illness characterized by a fever of 100.4 F or higher, difficulty breathing, and recent travel to Hong Kong; mainland China; Singapore; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Toronto, or close contact with a person with SARS. An estimated 5.8% of people with SARS die. There is no effective medication to treat the disease. Nearly 4,500 cases have been reported globally, with the majority occurring in several eastern countries and Canada. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the CDC) is recommending that non-essential travel plans be rescheduled to countries experiencing SARS. To date, one case of SARS has been identified in Westchester County.