

ANDREW J. SPANO, Westchester County Executive
JOSHUA LIPSMAN, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of Health
SUSAN TOLCHIN, Director of Communications

CONTACT: Caren Halbfinger

(914) 813-5013

(914) 813-5000 (After Hours)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 21, 2008

**TB CASES ARE DOWN, BUT STILL TOO HIGH
Health department awarded \$1.7 million grant to fight TB**

The Westchester County Health Department reported today that tuberculosis cases dropped to 44 in 2007, echoing the national decline in TB incidence last year.

The reduction in TB cases was especially welcome after a troubling spike of 72 cases in Westchester in 2006. However, apart from New York City, Westchester's caseload still was the second-highest in the state, after Nassau County.

The Westchester County Health Department also announced today that it has been awarded a three-year, \$575,000 annual grant from the New York State Department of Health to further its efforts to prevent, control and treat TB cases.

"Despite the decline, Westchester still has one of the highest rates of TB among all counties in New York State outside of New York City, and our Health Department continues to monitor, track and treat all cases vigilantly," said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. "That's why it is especially gratifying that we have been awarded a three-year state grant to continue these efforts."

From 1999 through 2007, there was an average of about 66 new TB cases diagnosed each year in Westchester, with most cases occurring among foreign-born residents. Cases increased in 2006 to 72, but declined last year to 44.

Because TB is relatively uncommon in the United States, there is often a delay in diagnosing and treating the disease. During this delay, the infection can be spread to others. While most people may not believe they are at risk, several recent cases have included otherwise healthy people. Among these have been people who work with the public, such as bus drivers, housekeepers, and people employed in schools or in the

MORE

healthcare field. The Health Department is not providing personal information about these individuals to protect their privacy.

In 2006, eight high school and college students in Westchester were diagnosed with TB. This led the Westchester County Health Department to test about 500 students and staff at their schools. In 2007, the Health Department tested more than 300 people at two elementary schools because one person who had contact in both places was diagnosed with active TB. Already this year, a similar case led the Health Department to test students and staff at a school for children with special needs. To protect the privacy of those involved, the Health Department is not identifying the schools.

The Health Department also has been working with the state Department of Health and student health services offices at Westchester colleges and schools to identify students who may be at risk of TB infection and to develop guidelines for their annual screening, evaluation and any needed treatment.

Tuberculosis is a disease that is spread from person to person through the air. It usually infects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body. Symptoms can include weakness, nausea, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. Persistent coughing, chest pain, or coughing up blood might be symptoms of TB of the lungs. In most cases, the patient will need to take medication for several months.

Although the numbers of TB cases in Westchester and the United States are low compared with most countries, the disease knows no borders and the great increase in international travel and has put all populations at increased risk. The World Health Organization has reported that drug-resistant TB is a growing threat around the world, with more than 45 countries (including the US) reporting extensively drug-resistant strains of TB. An estimated 1.7 million people die each year from TB throughout the world.

The Health Department's TB Control Program uses directly observed therapy (DOT), in which health care workers watch patients take each dose of medicine to make certain that the patients complete their course of therapy, which can last six to nine months. The program also places high priority on early identification and treatment of cases, as well as aggressive contact tracing to find and assess people who may have been exposed. In addition, through its TB Clinics, the Health Department provides free medical care and medications to individuals with tuberculosis infection and disease.

World TB Day will be observed on Monday, March 24th. For more information about tuberculosis, go to www.westchestergov.com/health or call the Health Department at (914) 813-5000.