

Testing the plan

By Linda Ober / The Citizen

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AUBURN - The problem: A Scipio couple in their 50s and an Auburn man in his 20s have been exposed to a new infectious respiratory illness while on a flight from Asia to the United States.

The solution: Isolation and quarantine.

Representatives from various city, county and state agencies participated in the Cayuga County Health Department's first tabletop quarantine and isolation drill Tuesday as a way to test a plan that before had only been on paper. Provided with the aforementioned fictitious scenario, they had to determine the best way to handle the situation.

Roughly 30 individuals, including those from the health department, law enforcement and Auburn Memorial Hospital, spent two hours in the basement of the county office building reacting - and most importantly, discussing - what role their respective agencies would play if the scenario were real, said Kathleen Cuddy, deputy director of health services and the facilitator for the exercise.

The state Department of Health is requiring every local health department to perform two drills - either tabletop or full scale - this year, Cuddy said. The county's second mandated drill, scheduled for June 16, will involve chemical radiation and will also be in the basement of the county office building.

Tuesday's exercise, which Cuddy said was closed to media because the quarantine plan is still in draft form and organizers didn't want participants to feel inhibited, highlighted agencies' strengths and weaknesses.

On the plus side, the various groups are learning to work well together, Cuddy said. "There's no question that in the last few years, there has been better communication among the agencies," she added.

Because the scenario involved an individual who refused to be quarantined, the health department had to work with police officers, the court system and representatives from several other groups to ensure that both the public - and the individual's civil liberties - were protected.

County Emergency Management Director Brian Dahl, who took part in Tuesday's drill, noted the importance of countywide cooperation.

"The big thing we're trying to stress is a unified command structure," he added.

The drill also showed participants places where they could use some improvement. Cuddy cited personal protective gear (i.e. special masks for communicable diseases) as one of the areas in which some local agencies may need further training.

Such drills are important because they show individuals what needs to be fixed and ensure that all agencies are ready to respond to emergencies, Dahl said.

"I think this needs to happen more often, working with the health department, working with other agencies," he said. "I just can't stress that enough. Training, training, training. For everybody. Not just responders but the general public also."

The health department will now take a look at participants' evaluation forms and may tweak the county's quarantine plan, Cuddy said. An after-action report, or summary of the drill, will be given to the state and the plan itself will be submitted for state approval.



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Auburn Fire Department Assistant Chief Terry Winslow listens during the Cayuga County Health Department's quarantine and inoculation drill at the County Office Building in Auburn Tuesday afternoon.

A quarantine and inoculation plan is still a fairly new idea for Cayuga County. The state health department mandated the development of a formalized plan a several years ago, around the time concerns about smallpox were appearing, Cuddy said. There has been a renewed interest in them, she continued, because of diseases such as Avian flu.

In the six years that Cuddy has been in her current position, the county has not had to mandate anyone to be involuntarily quarantined, though there have been situations where people voluntarily quarantined themselves for things like active pulmonary tuberculosis, she said.

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