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**County Council further strengthens public safety
with briefing on Pandemic Preparedness Plan**

Delaware County Council announced details of its Pandemic Preparedness and Response Plan at a public meeting Tuesday, Feb. 3, further strengthening Council's mission to ensure public health and safety.

The Pandemic Plan is a working document that positions the county and its public health partners to prepare for and respond to an influenza pandemic.

Compared to other natural infectious health threats, pandemic flu has the potential to cause large-scale illness and death, in addition to other destabilizing conditions in the community. According to estimates from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Delaware County could expect 600-800 additional deaths during the first six weeks of an epidemic period. Schools would close, businesses would suffer, and traditional medical services would be overwhelmed.

While experts debate the likelihood and specific type of a pandemic, they do agree that an influenza pandemic could be devastating. And that pre-crisis planning is vital.

County Council assures residents that Delaware County is prepared to address such a public health crisis and that the Pandemic Plan provides for an effective response to minimize the devastating impact caused by an epidemic.

"Public health and safety is a top priority for County Council. To ensure the highest level of response and effectiveness, our Emergency Operations Center is at the forefront when it comes to having a workable plan to address any risk to our residents," said Council Vice-Chairman Jack Whelan. "We're not trying to alarm people, but we do want to be prepared."

"The public should be reassured that there is constant surveillance of serious health risks on many levels," Councilman Whelan added. "We constantly coordinate with many agencies, across borders, at every level, to prevent a pandemic."

(more)

(Pandemic Plan continued)

The Pandemic Plan is an evolving document that is constantly updated based on changing threats and emergency guidelines. While not all aspects of the plan are made public due to the need to keep emergency response information secure, it's important for the public to know that the county has a plan to respond to and minimize the impact of a crisis on the 550,000 residents of Delaware County.

“It all starts with pre-crisis planning. Keeping our key emergency responders informed, educated and ready – that’s critical for a successful response to a crisis,” Councilman Whelan said.

The Delaware County Pandemic Response Plan, outlined by County Council on Feb. 3, was developed under the auspices of the Delaware County Department of Emergency Services and the Department of Intercommunity Health Coordination, under the direction of County Council and the Executive Director.

The plan was formulated through a contract with Crozer-Keystone Health System. The briefing on the plan was presented by County Council with Ed Truitt, Director of Emergency Services, Mark Mitchell of Crozer-Keystone Health System, and Wilbur Wolf, a consultant whose expertise is in disaster planning.

According to the Pandemic Plan summary: “The purpose of the plan is to provide the framework for effective and efficient preparation for and, if needed, response to a pandemic influenza or similar disaster situation should it be needed in response to a mass occurrence of H5N1 (avian flu) or similar mass contagious disease outbreak in the county.”

County Council invited leaders from all 49 municipalities to attend the Feb. 3 briefing on the Pandemic Plan.

Pandemic Preparedness and Response Plan

Pandemic history

Everyone is familiar with influenza, or the flu, which causes seasonal epidemics of disease resulting in an average of 36,000 deaths each year in the United States. A pandemic, or significant global epidemic, occurs when there is a mutation in the influenza virus so that most of the world's population has no previous exposure and is thus vulnerable to the virus.

Three pandemics occurred during the 20th century, the most severe of which, in 1918, caused over 500,000 U.S. deaths and more than 20 million worldwide.

While it's impossible to predict the evolution of a flu virus, recent outbreaks caused by avian influenza strains in Southeast Asia highlight the potential for a modern pandemic. In December, a teenager in Egypt died from avian flu after contact with poultry. So far in 2009, China has reported six cases of bird flu. There has not been a person-to-person transmission; only poultry-to-human.

In addition, lessons were learned on how to prevent the spread of a contagious illness from the SARS outbreak that happened in China in 2002 and in Canada in 2003.

Planning process is ongoing

The current Pandemic Plan is the result of three years of development. Since 2005, the Delaware County team focused on the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) plan, which provides for mass dispensation of medications to the public in the event of a natural or manmade event.

SNS drills have been conducted at several school districts to test the plan and prepare participants.

In 2007, the County and its partners developed the first draft Pandemic Influenza Plan. Since then, the Pandemic and SNS teams have refined both plans, conducted training exercises and they meet regularly to address the latest developments in emergency response.

In the event of a pandemic, County Council would direct activation of the plan. County leadership would collaborate with the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) and other local and regional stakeholders to ensure an effective response.

Preparedness, Response, Recovery

The Pandemic Plan encompasses three phases:

Preparedness involves public education, pre-event training and disease surveillance

Response details reaction to the onset of a pandemic, including continuity of governance and other essential operations, disease containment, mass medication dispensing (SNS), mass medical care and mass casualty management.

Recovery details efforts to return the county to stable operating conditions.

Components of the document include: incident management, public communications, law and order, surveillance, diagnostics, infection control, vaccine/anti-viral distribution, mass medical care and mass fatality management.

Register for Delco Alert

One of the components of the Pandemic Plan is the county's emergency notification system, Delco Alert. Residents can register to receive emergency notifications through Delco Alert by visiting <https://delco.alertpa.org>.

There is also a section on the Delco Alert registration form that enables people to volunteer in the event of a major emergency.

"County Council provides Delco Alert to strengthen safety in our communities and to enhance the county's overall response to an emergency," Council Vice-Chair Whelan said. "We encourage our residents to sign up so they can receive alerts of major emergencies in a timely manner to prepare themselves and their families to take action."

In the event of a major emergency, every available means of communication would be utilized to direct residents on a course of action, from the traditional news media and municipal alarm systems to police and neighbor-to-neighbor warnings.

