

Denver Water readies for flu pandemic

New danger pushes agency to complete emergency planning

By Jim Erickson, Rocky Mountain News
April 17, 2006

They're stockpiling protective masks, latex gloves and hand sanitizer in case a flu pandemic hits Colorado.

They're squirreling away nonperishable foods, adding extra cots and planning to cross-train employees to do the critical jobs.

Preparations at a local hospital?

No, this work is under way at Denver Water, a utility serving 1.2 million customers.

"We've talked about doing this for a long time, but the flu is the thing that drove us to finally do it," said Brian Good, director of operations and maintenance for Denver Water.

Good has ordered 12,000 protective masks that would be distributed to Denver Water's 1,100 employees if a global flu epidemic, or pandemic, strikes.

In addition, the utility just purchased supplies for 37 emergency kits to be stashed at water treatment plants and key pumping stations.

Each kit contains first-aid supplies, duct tape, rope, flashlights and batteries, toilet paper, a cook kit and portable stove, a sleeping bag, and other gear that would be useful in any type of emergency - from a blizzard to a terrorist attack.

The kits also contain masks, gloves and hand sanitizer added specifically for flu preparedness.

Food in the kits includes ramen noodles, canned ravioli, canned fruit, raisins and jelly. Each plastic tub holds enough food to feed one or two people for three days.

"The idea is that we want to have enough supplies on hand to keep our treatment plants and critical pumping stations staffed" during a pandemic, Good said.

Last month, U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt and Gov. Bill Owens convened a Denver "flu summit" to discuss preparations for a global flu epidemic or pandemic.

Leavitt said that "we are overdue and we are underprepared" for such an event, though no one can say when it might happen.

The highly pathogenic H5N1 bird flu virus sweeping through Asia, Europe and Africa could mutate into a form that passes easily between humans. Then again, it could remain a bird virus that rarely affects humans.

If a flu pandemic hits the United States, the federal government won't be there to save you, Leavitt told the crowd of about 1,000 at the Colorado Convention Center.

"Any community that fails to prepare, with the expectation that the federal government will come to their rescue, will be sadly disappointed," Leavitt said.

The responsibility for keeping society functioning will fall to local governments, health departments, emergency responders, school systems, businesses, utilities, churches and individual families, he and Owens said.

Denver Water Manager Chips Barry said the utility started thinking about flu preparedness six months ago.

For the water company, employee absenteeism will likely be the biggest challenge, he said. Up to 40 percent of the workers could be absent during a flu pandemic - either because they are sick, they're caring for the sick or they're scared to leave home.

"Most of the people worried about pandemic planning - hospitals, nurses, the Red Cross, disaster-relief people - are worried that they're going to get overwhelmed," Barry said.

"That's not my issue," he said. "I'm worried about being understaffed at a time when I absolutely have to continue to provide clean water."

During a flu epidemic, two of the utility's four treatment plants would be closed, Barry said.

Denver Water employees who make it to work would be repositioned to maintain key functions: collecting water, treating it, distributing it and fixing big water-main leaks.

A minimum of 80 to 100 people would be needed to keep the system running.

"I have to have the people that can produce the clean water, put it in the pipes and get it to the right place," Barry said. "And if there's a serious main break, I've got to have one or two teams of utility workers who can fix it."

If efficient human-to-human transmission of the H5N1 virus is detected anywhere in the world, 25 to 30 Denver Water employees will be trained as backups for the most critical jobs, Barry said. Experts in the key specialties are being asked to prepare teaching outlines that would be used if the cross-training sessions are needed.

"These are the kinds of plans we're hoping that businesses and communities and schools and others will undertake," said Dr. Ned Calonge, the state health department's chief medical officer.

If a flu epidemic hits, maintaining water, electricity and food supplies will be critical, he said.

"The secret to mitigating the impact is to keep essential services going so folks can stay in their homes and don't have to go out and get exposed to people with influenza," Calonge said.

"If people are able to stay in their homes, it changes the way the epidemic moves through a community," he said. "It reduces the number of people infected and shortens the duration" of the epidemic locally.

One wild card in Denver Water's planning is the supply of chlorine used to disinfect water, Barry said.

Each treatment plant has about a 30-day supply. If more is needed, no one knows if it will be available during a pandemic, he said.

"I can take care of everything except chlorine," Barry said.

"My assumption going into this is that you would be a fool to assume that anybody outside the water department would be able to give you much help on anything," he said. "You just don't know, so don't assume."

Be prepared

The federal government has assembled a series of checklists to help people prepare for a pandemic.

- **Online:** pandemicflu.gov/plan/checklists.html