

Some believe county health unit might aid response to flu

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As of 3 p.m. Monday, there were no confirmed cases of swine flu in Pennsylvania. And county and state officials hope it stays that way.

But what if an epidemic does break out in Lancaster County? Are we prepared to deal with it?

Randy Gockley, the county's emergency management coordinator said Monday he's "confident with what the state is capable of providing for Lancaster County."

Dr. Hilda Shirk, project manager of Partnership for a County Public Health Department, agreed.

But she said the response likely would be better if the county had its own health department.

"I would be hesitant to say that absent a county health department, Lancaster County would be in jeopardy," Shirk said. "But certainly there is the opportunity now for a fragmented response."

The partnership includes United Way of Lancaster County, Business Group on Health, every hospital in the county and the National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom.

United Way has led a campaign to form a health department since 2004.

Last year, the county commissioners held a public hearing to gather information and opinions on forming a health department.

At that hearing, Gockley testified that having a department would better prepare the county for health emergencies, such as pandemics.

"Quite frankly, I do not have the staffing expertise (on hand) to address these health-related issues," Gockley told the commissioners.

On Monday afternoon, Gockley and his peers from across the state participated in a conference call led by the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and the state Department of Health.

Without a county health department, Gockley said, the state Department of Health is Lancaster County's medical expert. Six Pennsylvania counties have their own health departments.

If swine flu does break out in the county and medical actions such as quarantines are required, it would be the state that would make such declarations, according to Gockley.

"Emergency management agencies don't have the authority to quarantine," he said.

The head of a county health department would, Shirk said.

"It's not that the state wouldn't do the right thing, but they have all of Pennsylvania to worry about," she said. "Things might not happen as swiftly here as they would with a local department that could customize the response to fit our unique situation."

County Commissioner Craig Lehman has in the past voiced his support for a county health department.

On Monday, however, he said now is not the time to talk about whether such a department would better equip the county to deal with a swine flu pandemic.

"We have the resources we have, and we have to be prepared to marshal those resources in the event something happens," he said. "And God forbid we have to do that."

For now, Gockley said, the state Department of Health is taking a "ready approach" by reaching out to schools, the county Office of Aging, health care providers and local hospitals to inform them about swine flu and to request that they report any suspected cases.

The goal is to identify and contain an outbreak if cases show up here.

According to the Associated Press, cases have been reported in New York, Ohio and New Jersey.

There is no vaccine for swine flu, but it can be treated with antiviral drugs.

Disseminating information is the tactic being employed by the state at this time, Gockley said.

During the conference call Monday afternoon, state officials urged county emergency management officials to pass the word that residents seeking information on swine flu should call 1-877-724-3258 or visit the state health department's Web site at <http://www.health.state.pa.us/>.

If Lancaster had a county health department, Shirk said, that agency would act as the local information center.

"And a local department would be better able to serve our community," she said.

While her support for a county health department is as strong as ever, Shirk said the partnership she heads is considering putting the idea on the back burner.

"Given the current state of the economy, we're trying to decide if now is the right time to move forward with this or if it would be better to wait," she said.

Shirk expects the partnership to make that decision by the end of the year.

Lehman's position on a health department mirrored the partnership's considerations.

"I still support the creation of a county health department, although, given our fiscal situation, I might delay that a year or so," he said.

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