

Cities lacking biowar training

More needed at local level

By Steve Sternberg
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WASHINGTON — Many American communities remain unprepared to handle a terrorist attack involving smallpox and other biowarfare agents, federal health experts said Tuesday.

Although the federal government has beefed up its drug and vaccine stockpiles, local health departments lack the facilities, trained staff and the ability to deliver vaccines and other basic health services, experts said.

This picture emerged at the first meeting of the Health and Human Services Secretary's Council on Public Health Preparedness. It underscores how vulnerable major U.S. cities are to bioterrorism nearly a year after Sept. 11 and the anthrax attacks.

Smallpox can be prevented with vaccinations, even a few days after exposure. The government now has enough vaccine to protect 155 million people — and the capability to ship vaccine to every U.S. city.

But many cities aren't prepared to provide the shots, screen out those who may be harmed by the vaccine and educate millions of people about the vaccine's risks, experts told committee members.

"Our strength has got to be at the local level," said D.A. Henderson, chairman of the committee, which is advising HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson on the difficult issues of preparing for bioterrorism attacks.

Henderson noted that not even the military can swoop in and deal with a contagious epidemic.

Council members raised their own concerns about unresolved policy issues. Those include questions about vaccine liability and compensation for those harmed by vaccine, the lack of coordination between public and private health services and the need for a seamless system for detecting and tracking outbreaks of contagious disease.

Nevertheless, Thompson and others noted that the country has made significant progress over the past 11 months: \$1.1 billion has been delivered to states to rebuild public health services that were suffering from years of neglect.

"Every day, every week, every month we are getting a lot stronger," Thompson said.

Several officials praised the government's effort to respond to last fall's attacks by pouring money into public health and attempting to integrate the public and private health systems to better respond to disasters.

"Hospitals are just beginning to respond in a comprehensive way," said Jerome Hauer, assistant secretary for Public Health Emergency Preparedness.

Council members said the investment already has paid off in states coping with West Nile virus, a deadly mosquito-borne disease. Government officials noted that West Nile has also served as a useful test of systems set up to combat bioterror.

A rapid response

If smallpox were detected in a major U.S. city, federal health officials would need 4,500 people to staff 20 clinics. Those clinics would:

- ▶ Operate 16 hours a day, vaccinating 5,900 people a day at each clinic.

- ▶ Vaccinate a total of about 118,000 people a day.

- ▶ Administer about 1 million vaccine doses in nine days.

Sources: Secretary's Council on Public Health Preparedness, HHS.