

Pandemic to preparedness

by Jay Jones

How prepared are we as a nation to deal with all types of disasters – natural or intentionally caused – that can threaten the public’s health? Last week PPHR released its second state-by-state report that presented data on preparedness activities occurring in the 50 states, 4 major cities, and 8 U.S. insular areas funded by CDC’s Public Health Emergency Preparedness cooperative agreement. The bottom line: we’ve made a good deal of progress, especially in laboratory capacities and response readiness areas, but much more needs to be done.

To discuss these points, last week Ali Khan along with other members of CDC’s Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response met with state public health preparedness directors from across the country in Newport, Rhode Island at the 6th Annual Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) Directors of Public Health Preparedness Conference (DPHP). The group was there to share successes and challenges of response activities during the H1N1 pandemic and other events such as record-setting floods and the Gulf oil spill.

The directors were joined by representatives from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, as well as partner organizations such as ASTHO, the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL), and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO).

Partners

Khan and RADM Nicole Lurie, MD, MSPH (Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, HHS) opened the three-day conference. Their

keynote address remarks concerning the importance of partnerships and the need for consistent preparedness funding were reinforced by many during the conference, which was held on Goat Island in Newport’s Narragansett Bay. The small island housed the U.S. Naval Torpedo Station for over a hundred years, and the Coast Guard still maintains a presence there. Whether discussing the area’s rich history of military preparedness or today’s public health preparedness



“Public health preparedness is about what we do everyday – not just responding to major events.”

RADM Ali Khan, MD, MPH

activities, the participants were enthusiastic and pleased to be networking face to face with their colleagues.

“It’s always important to learn from your peers,” says Alonzo Plough, Director of Emergency Preparedness and Response program for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. “We built a lot of new partnerships as a consequence of the spring and fall H1N1 response, which have really helped us moving forward in bringing those new partners into the broader area of health preparedness.”

Team members from the PPHR Communication Office, Policy Office, Division of State and Local Readiness (DSLRL), and the Division of Strategic National Stockpile (DSNS) were also on hand to help roll out the report. Ann O’Connor (Policy Office),



who led the development of the report, noted that preparedness reports are “an important part of CDC’s overall focus on demonstrating results, driving program improvements, and increasing accountability for the nation’s investment in public health preparedness.”

We spoke to several attendees at the conference to learn what they hoped to get from the conference, as well as their thoughts on preparedness activities over the past few years.

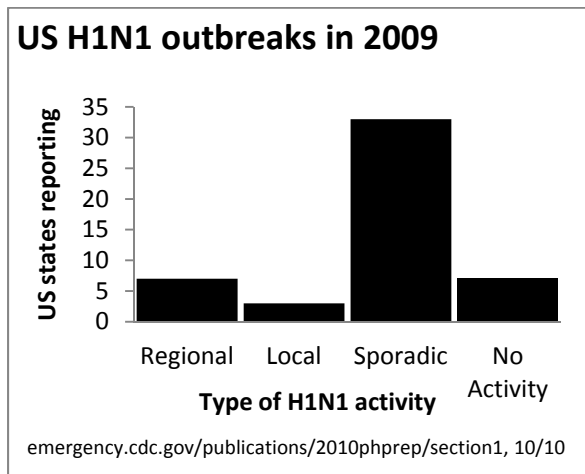


Figure: 1.

“This is an excellent opportunity to get current information about what’s happening at the federal level, other states, and to the programs that we administer,” according to Betsey Lyman, Deputy Director, Public Health Emergency Preparedness for California. “I view it as an extremely valuable part of keeping me informed about things I need for my job.”

“There have been a lot of success stories over the past year following the H1N1 response” says Beth Maldin, Deputy Director, Bureau of Emergency Management, New York City Health. “New York City conducted a massive school vaccination and



PODs campaign, and we distributed H1N1 vaccine to hundreds of thousands of people. The CDC PHEP cooperative agreement funds have been critical to building response capacity, and the successful H1N1 response would not have been possible without the foundation of preparedness that has been developed and maintained using CDC preparedness funds.”

Highlighting preparedness efforts

Creating the state preparedness report required the expertise of many CDC staff, team work among our state and local partners, and coordination between PHEP divisions, specifically DSLR and DSNS.

Report data are based on activities taking place in public health laboratories and in response readiness areas such as rapid communication, planning, exercising, and in evaluating and improving responses. The data include performance measures from the Public Health Emergency Preparation (PHEP) cooperative agreement (managed by DSLR), review scores that evaluated states’ abilities to receive, store, and distribute medical assets from CDC’s Strategic National Stockpile; and proficiency test results for members of the Laboratory Response Network managed by CDC. Staff from CDC’s DSLR and DSNS teams also attended the conference and worked with partners in many of the sessions, including a special presentation on CDC’s new PHEP five-year cooperative agreement.

The work continues

Tim Wiedrick sums up the conference as follows,

which could also be applied to the last few years of preparedness work and the publication of the report:

“These events reinforced the idea that preparedness activities, training, and exercises are critical to safeguard the nation’s health.”