

## County officials preparing for worst scenario

*By Amaris Elliott-Engel / The Citizen*  
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With the emergence of serious animal disease pathogens in recent years, including the new bird flu strain threatening to cause a global flu pandemic, it's a season of pre-disaster planning at the Cayuga County Department of Health and Human Services.

The department is in the middle of developing an isolation and quarantine plan and developing a pandemic flu plan. Development of both plans are required as part of federal funds allocated through the state to the county.

"Every local department (of health) needs to develop one," said Kathleen Cuddy, deputy director of health services.

Development of the local isolation and quarantine plan, designed to handle the outbreak of a widespread or highly dangerous communicable disease, will include a tabletop drill scheduled for three hours on May 30.

The disease scenario will be kept secret from participants so they will face a level of surprise that a real-live communicable disease outbreak would present. Officials will participate in the hypothetical disease outbreak scenario that would involve the county's 911 center, the county's Emergency Management Office, the Cayuga County Sheriff's Office, the Auburn Police Department, the New York State Police in Auburn and as well as county health department employees, primarily from the department's communicable disease program.

Cayuga County Judge Peter Corning will be involved because judge's orders for quarantining might be necessary for someone who is not obeying quarantine requirements, Cuddy said. County Attorney Fred Westphal also is expected to participate.

The county's pandemic flu plan is expected to be finalized by the end of the summer. Each county is responsible for formulating its own response plan under a formal preparedness plan released by the state Department of Health in February.

Health department officials will meet with school officials, local business representatives and others to discuss how families could ride out an outbreak and when schools and businesses would be kept open and when they would be shut, Cuddy said.

The focus of the plan is what is best for public health and does not weigh any potential economic impacts of implementing the plan, Cuddy said.

The biggest question to be determined is when the plan would be activated, Cuddy said. "When we have a confirmed case in North America, when we have a case in New York State, when we have a case in upstate?"

On a parallel disaster front, Jim Hotaling, the executive director of the Cayuga County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Mark Burger, program manager of the Skaneateles Lake Watershed Agricultural Program, are developing a protocol for farms to know which agencies to notify if there has been a hazardous chemical spill on their operations. That will include officials from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the Soil and Water Conservation District and local fire departments.

Just like the county's unknown substance response protocol that guides how to handle a suspicious substance in the county office building, this plan will tell farm workers what steps to take if there is a spill that is on its way into local waterways, Hotaling said.

“You got to do the same thing on farmland,” he said.

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