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The Gazette-Enterprise

County plans to deal with unthinkable

By Ron Maloney

The Gazette-Enterprise

Guadalupe County, Seguin, Texas

Published March 19, 2009

SEGUIN — Around the world, up to two billion people have died — depending upon whose count one uses — and in the United States alone deaths could total one third of the population.

Somewhere in the federal government, the decision is made and secret medical stockpiles stored at secret locations are loaded into aircraft and, within 12 hours, moved to wherever they are most likely to be able to stop a pandemic that threatens mankind.

Local officials have 36 hours to treat their entire population — in Guadalupe County that would be 115,000 people.

A massive call-up of volunteers that, in this county alone would take 1,000 medical professionals and lay people is required to prepare and operate five Points of Dispensing (PODs) at which the life-saving medications can be distributed.

It may sound like the plot of a sci-fi thriller — but it's what would happen if the 1918 Spanish Flu that decimated the world happened today.

Guadalupe County emergency management and their counterparts around the country are preparing for just such a scenario because in the history of humankind it happens once every 100 years or so — and the time is coming for the next one.

Were it to happen tomorrow, though, local officials would fail in the effort because they lack the local volunteers needed to try to stop the outbreak.

Guadalupe County Emergency Management Coordinator Dan Kinsey and his volunteer coordinator, Kay Hays, are speaking to local large employers and service clubs, seeking to compile a list of volunteers who can help. Wednesday they made presentations to a pair of organizations, including the Seguin Kiwanis Club.

Kinsey, who is responsible for coordinating the county's response in times of natural or man-made disasters, made a presentation on the "Strategic National Stockpile" — those medical supplies the government has hidden in up to two dozen locations — and what the scenario would be like if part of it was distributed in Guadalupe County.

Kinsey and Hays are preparing for a May 2 dress rehearsal of a pandemic disaster at the Navarro ISD. Volunteers will set up and operate a "drive through" POD in which they will take a practice run at registering, screening and pretending to inoculate 100 volunteers so they can identify whatever problems might come up and prepare to meet them.

The same procedures with minor changes would apply to any similar emergency, such as an outbreak of smallpox or an anthrax or ricin attack, Kinsey said.

The challenges are daunting ones when one considers the kind of response that would be required in Guadalupe County alone.

Kinsey's done the math based on the size of the average family, average vehicle occupancy and average vehicle length including space between vehicles of.

Were Guadalupe County to attempt to handle such traffic in one lane in five locations, each line would be 41 miles long, Kinsey said. For San Antonio, the lines would be more than 2,000 miles long — the distance from Calgary, Alberta to San Antonio.

And scenarios using license plate numbers to sort the lines are not viewed as likely to succeed, Kinsey said.

"If I tell you this half of this room is going to get your medication today and that half will get it tomorrow if there's any left, are you going to wait?" Kinsey asked.

What Kinsey envisions is five "drive-through" PODs operating 24 hours a day until done on 12-hour shifts that will require 100 volunteers for duties as varied as administering medications, filling out paperwork, distributing food or water, providing security or watching the children of other volunteers.

The five PODs would have to be able to accommodate 3,200 people each per hour, and to do that, they would have to be located in areas where the traffic can be controlled without resulting in gridlock — meaning relatively familiar rural areas where traffic might be "contra-flowed" to provide the most efficient access.

NISD is one such location, and at 10 a.m. on Saturday, May 2, Kinsey wants to run his drill.

"We're looking for 1,000 volunteers in all, but we need at least 100 for the May 2 exercise," Kinsey said. "This is not a big commitment — maybe three or four hours once a year — but it's definitely a way you can help your community, your county and your country."

There is another benefit to volunteering in case of a disaster, Kinsey said.

"Volunteers and their families will receive whatever countermeasures are required first," Kinsey said. "They'll be needed because our goal is to do the most good we can and we need your help to do it. I'd love to see the Kiwanis or any service club or employer become involved."

The Guadalupe County Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster, or VOAD, needs 100 volunteers for a May 2 emergency disaster drill at Navarro ISD. In the long term, 1,000 volunteers are needed. For information, contact volunteer coordinator Kay Hays at (830) 303-9702 or by e-mail at kay.hays@co.guadalupe.tx.us.

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