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Health Department, Officials Address County’s Preparedness for Ebola

PITTSBURGH – Allegheny County Health Department Director Dr. Karen A. Hacker was joined today by Chief Alvin Henderson of Allegheny County Emergency Services and Jim Gill, Acting Executive Director of the Allegheny County Airport Authority to talk about the County’s preparedness in the event of a suspected or confirmed case of the Ebola virus in Allegheny County.

“There is a relatively low risk that there will be an Ebola outbreak in our area. We have no confirmed cases in Allegheny County or the Commonwealth, although there are residents of our state being monitored in Texas,” said Dr. Hacker. “The Ebola risk is being contained, but as we do with any public health issue, we are doing our due diligence to ensure that we are prepared in the event that a suspected or confirmed case of the virus is in our region.”

The Ebola virus is a potentially deadly virus that causes high fevers, severe headache, muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain and unexplained bleeding or bruising. It is spread by directly touching an infected person or their blood or bodily fluids. You cannot get Ebola simply by being near someone who is infected. Ebola is not spread through the air. People are only contagious after they begin to have symptoms, such as a fever. Those who have the highest risk of getting the disease are healthcare workers or others who have had direct contact taking care of Ebola patients.

“Since late September, we have been working with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the PA Department of Health, our local health networks, and emergency responders have been working cooperatively to ensure that our level of preparedness remains at the highest level,” said Dr. Hacker. “We continue to share information, review policies and protocols, make changes or additions as we learn more and are focused on ensuring that we have done everything we can to protect the public should we see a suspected or confirmed case of the virus here.”

In addition to the ongoing collaboration with local health networks, the Health Department has also been working with Allegheny County Emergency Services in a lengthy process which also involved the CDC, the Allegheny County 911 Medical Director and the EMS Division Chief to adopt a screening tool that call takers may use on medical calls to provide information to emergency responders.

“As Dr. Hacker indicated, there is relatively low risk of Ebola in this area. That being said, we are
constantly reviewing and evaluating our policies and protocols and making changes to ensure that our call takers get the appropriate information from callers to communicate to our first responders,” said Chief Henderson. “Beginning today, our call takers will be completing additional questioning on medical calls so that, if appropriate, they can determine whether there may be a risk of Ebola. By providing additional information to our first responders, we allow them to be more proactive in their own response.”

The CDC, along with the Department of Homeland Security’s Customs and Border Protection, and partners are providing screening of travelers at airports both in the United States and affected countries in West Africa to prevent the spread of Ebola. Exit screening is occurring when travelers are departing from outbreak-affected countries to look for sick travelers or travelers exposed to Ebola to delay them from boarding an airplane until it is safe for them to travel. Additionally, U.S. international airports and other ports of entry are screening travelers who have come from or through Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. While the Pittsburgh International Airport is not on that list, its operations staff continues to participate in briefings on Ebola, are prepared to implement different protocols and also remain on alert for sick travelers.

“Our priority at the Pittsburgh International Airport remains the safety and well-being of our travelers, visitors and employees. Our actions in response to the Ebola virus are not brand new. These actions are similar to those we have taken in response to H1N1, SARS, Bird Flu and other illnesses that could be carried by travelers,” said Mr. Gill. "We have emergency plans and incident response plans in place and continue to review those in cooperation with the Health Department and Emergency Services to ensure that they are responsive to what we know about public health risks.”

All three officials reiterated that while there is a great deal of media attention surrounding the Ebola virus, that the chance of risk remains extremely low in our region. Regardless, the region is prepared to protect the public should there be a suspected or confirmed case here, and the organizations will continue to collaborate and communicate about response moving forward.

“We will continue to communicate the information that we have, to report any new details quickly, and, if needed, will be responding with the maximum level of care,” said Dr. Hacker.

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