



Talking Points: State Department of Health Bioterrorism Preparedness

Introduction: The state Department of Health (DOH) Bioterrorism Preparedness Program focuses on enhancing coordination among core public health activities of epidemiology, laboratory science, communications, and training. The following briefly describes these activities and how the Bioterrorism Program has enhanced these areas.

Epidemiology (Detection)

What the public health system does: Collects information regarding cases of notifiable conditions such as salmonella, measles, tuberculosis, and approximately 70 other conditions including unexplained critical illness or death and diseases of potential bioterrorist origin. Public health authorities investigate each of these cases to determine what steps are needed for assuring the individual is appropriately treated and that measures have been taken to keep others from getting sick. A new symptom-based surveillance system that tracks emergency dispatch and 911 calls in Seattle and King County produces a daily log that identifies unusual trends in disease.

How does the public health system respond to threats of bioterrorism or unexplained illness? The following entities are notified: state Emergency Management Division, the public health system (local agencies, DOH management, the Region X U.S. Public Health Service Office and the CDC) and the FBI.

How has Washington's participation in the Bioterrorism Preparedness Program produced greater readiness?

- Bioterrorism surveillance coordinators have been hired for the state as well as King and Spokane Counties
- Local bioterrorism response plans have been developed for King and Spokane Counties
- Protocols for event notification and epidemiologic response are being developed
- Case definitions and technical assistance materials for unexplained critical illness or death, anthrax, smallpox, tularemia, and plague have been developed
- Assessments of local health system response capacity have been completed statewide
- Raised awareness through educational presentations to health care professionals, local health jurisdictions, veterinarians, and others

Laboratory Science (Confirmation)

What the public health system does: Serves as a reference laboratory for specialized microbiology testing and coordinates with the epidemiology function of the public health system.

How does the public health system respond to threats of bioterrorism or unexplained illness? Protocols have been developed for law enforcement agencies (FBI, WSP, local agencies) to transmit specimens to the Public Health Laboratories in Shoreline for testing. As DOH is alerted to this threat, microbiologists prepare the bio-safety level-three laboratory for the specimen's arrival. Once the specimen has arrived, DOH performs diagnostic testing procedures and communicates results to the public health system, law enforcement, and emergency

management. In a confirmed bioterrorism event, specimens would be forwarded to the bio-safety level-four laboratory at the CDC in Atlanta.

How has Washington's participation in the Bioterrorism Preparedness Program produced greater readiness?

- Established testing and transportation protocols for agents of highest concern for bioterrorism
- Established DOH staff proficiency in performing diagnostic testing for agents of highest concern
- Purchased equipment and supplies to perform these tests
- Determined levels of bioterrorism preparedness and training of commercial clinical laboratories

Health Alert Network – (Training and Communication)

What the public health system does: Uses multiple communication methods to inform the public health system of cases of notifiable conditions. Uses academic, continuing education and other means to educate public health disease investigators around emergent health threats and discoveries.

How does the public health system respond to threats of bioterrorism or unexplained illness? Voice transmissions and faxed documents are used to inform and communicate with responsible authorities about these events.

How has Washington's participation in the Bioterrorism Preparedness Program produced greater readiness?

- Installed and established secure networking technologies between DOH and local health departments that cover approximately two-thirds of the state's population. We are working with the remaining third to improve readiness
- Developed exercises, training and assistance materials for local health system response
- Established four-way videoconferencing capacity at Kent, Shoreline, Olympia, and Spokane
- Established dedicated satellite downlink facilities at Kent and Olympia
- Established a cooperative network of satellite downlink facilities in each of Washington's counties for downlinks to local public health practitioners

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