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Let's regionalize health

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Renew Lehigh Valley

The Lehigh Valley Board of Health is at work planning for a regional health department that would serve communities across Lehigh and Northampton counties. The recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus highlights why a stronger, regional approach to public health is crucial to individuals, families and communities.

The number of cases of H1N1, known as swine flu, has been rising dramatically in communities everywhere. Here in the Lehigh Valley, this situation has been met with a vigorous response from health departments at the local and state levels, hospitals and other health providers, school districts, employers, community-based organizations and others.

While each of these key players has responded swiftly to the spread of H1N1, what the Lehigh Valley lacks is a unified, regional response to this potential epidemic.

As fears of the increased spread of H1N1 mount, various questions arise: Where can I obtain shots for me and my children? Is it safe to send my kids to school? Who should be getting the vaccine?

A regional health department for the Lehigh Valley would provide a clearly identified, single point of contact for anyone seeking information and services to keep themselves and their families safe from contagion. Lacking this, community members have had to seek information through health offices, school districts or health care institutions, all of which have been flooded with calls.

The Lehigh Valley is fortunate to have two excellent local health departments -- the health bureaus in Allentown and Bethlehem. These departments are meant to serve residents of the two cities and, accordingly, receive state funds to serve that resident population.

In reality, though, people across the Lehigh Valley --regardless of where they live -- are turning to the Allentown and Bethlehem health bureaus for help. The city bureaus should be commended for having not turned away residents of outlying areas who come looking for information, referrals or other types of guidance. In Allentown, the health bureau also has taken the step of allowing non-residents as well as city residents to receive the H1N1 vaccine.

In the face of the H1N1 crisis, then, these two city health departments are largely functioning as regional departments already. The problem is that they do not have the funding, staff capacity or resources needed to do so.

It is unrealistic to expect the Allentown and Bethlehem bureaus to provide comprehensive public health services to the region. The Lehigh Valley deserves better than a fragmented public health system that is not adequately resourced to address the region's needs.

Fortunately, the effort to establish a bi-county health department is moving forward. The 11-member Lehigh Valley Board of Health, appointed earlier this year, has been working to develop a services and staffing plan for a regional health department for the two counties.

This department will provide vaccinations and other services that prevent the spread of communicable disease, ensure water and air quality, offer health education and screenings, and boost the region's preparedness for an epidemic or other public health emergency.

The Lehigh Valley Board of Health is expected to complete its planning process by the first part of 2010, at which point approval from the two counties and municipalities will be needed to make the regional health

department a reality.

When the time comes to consider taking this historic step, policymakers and the public should bear in mind the current H1N1 outbreak and the case it makes for working across city and county lines in helping individuals, families and communities stay healthy.

Steven Bliss is executive director and Beata Bujaska is campaign coordinator of Renew Lehigh Valley, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization promoting urban revitalization, smart growth and regional collaboration. For more information on RenewLV's Regional Health Initiative, visit www.renewlv.org/health, write to smartgrowth@renewlv.org or call 484-893-1062.

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