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Contact: Kate Fowlie, CCHS, 925-250-2371

Notice to Editors: The media is invited to come to the drill medication dispensing site in El Cerrito, **9 am to 11:15 a.m. Thursday, November 20, El Cerrito Community Center, 7007 Moeser Lane, El Cerrito.** Parking is available on 900 block of Pomona Avenue. Please check in on arrival.

Regional drill aims to prepare Bay Area for large scale health emergency

Local health departments and community volunteers participating throughout region

Local health departments across the Bay Area are participating in a regional drill this week to better prepare their communities in the event of a large scale health emergency.

As part of the exercise, public health departments will practice activities such as the delivery of emergency supplies and mock “point-of-dispensing” (POD) sites where life-saving medication would be distributed to the public on Thursday. The drill scenario is an anthrax bioterrorism attack that affects the entire Bay Area and requires a large number of people receive medication to prevent them from getting sick.

Participants include health departments from Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Benito, San Mateo, Santa Clara, San Francisco and Sonoma counties, and the City of Berkeley. The drill is the culmination of three years of planning by local health departments, which have been meeting monthly since 2005 to coordinate overall Bay Area public health emergency preparedness efforts, said regional drill spokesperson Dr. Muntu Davis, who is the director for the Alameda County Public Health Department and serves as the Regional Disaster Medical Health Coordinator. Regional planning is critical because the Bay Area is a commuter population, with many people working and living in different areas.

“This exercise is part of ongoing collaboration by local health departments throughout the Bay Area to protect the public’s health. Though this drill focuses on the response to a bioterrorism event, the planning and collaboration that takes place as part of this exercise will help better prepare the Bay Area for any type of health emergency, including Ebola,” Dr. Davis said.

The health departments are partnering with cities, hospitals, clinics, community organizations and first responders and have enlisted hundreds of volunteers to participate in the exercise activities. In Contra Costa County, the health department has partnered with the City of El Cerrito to open a mock POD medication dispensing site on Thursday. Representatives from the city of San Pablo also are participating. Volunteers from community groups like Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) and the American Red Cross have been trained to work at the site, and many community volunteers also will play the role of people seeking medication, said Kim Cox, Emergency Services Manager for Contra Costa Public Health.

“Following the 2001 anthrax attacks, the federal government directed all health departments in the United States to develop plans to rapidly and safely provide medication to the public in the event of a public health emergency,” Cox said. “This exercise provides the opportunity to put our plans into practice as a region. In Contra Costa County, we are excited that El Cerrito agreed to partner with us on these preparedness efforts to help save lives and prevent illness.”

As part of regional preparedness efforts, the Bay Area health departments formed the Bay Area Mass Prophylaxis Working Group (BAMPWG) in 2005 to coordinate planning and response efforts. BAMPWG also created the www.BayAreaDisasterMeds.org website that would be used to provide the public with information on where to get medication in the event of a real emergency.

The Bay Area anthrax exercise was organized by BAMPWG and is supported with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Bay Area Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI).

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