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VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH WINS TWO FEDERAL GRANTS TO IMPROVE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Two new federal grants will support the Virginia Department of Health’s efforts to protect Virginians during influenza pandemic or other disasters.

The grants will enhance VDH’s planning efforts in Fairfax County and a pilot project based at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital. The grants were funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and run through September 2009.

“These two grants from the CDC will improve our planning for a possible influenza pandemic by focusing on preparedness issues in two of the state’s most populated areas, Tidewater and Northern Virginia,” said Lisa G. Kaplowitz, M.D., MSHA, VDH’s Interim Deputy Commissioner for Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs. “Both grants address major challenges that Virginia will face in a pandemic — reaching vulnerable populations and providing health services in times of shortages.”

Sentara will host a year-long, \$1 million pilot at its Norfolk hospital to implement and evaluate a guide to help health care facilities make critical decisions about delivering essential services during times of extraordinary demand, such as a pandemic, when resources may be scarce. VDH developed the “Critical Resource Shortage Planning Guide” in collaboration with the law firm Troutman Sanders LLP and the Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association.

The pilot program, which began in September, will revise the planning guide with information learned through “before and after” exercises conducted at the hospital to determine providers’ readiness to respond to emergencies or disasters. After evaluating the guide’s effectiveness, the program will produce a corresponding toolkit for other health care facilities throughout the Commonwealth to implement.

“It’s our hope that we will be able to share our learning with providers nationwide,” said Steve Gravely, head of Troutman Sanders’ health care practice. Troutman Sanders will work directly with Sentara to incorporate concepts for meeting critical health care needs during crises.

A \$365,000 grant will build on preparedness outreach efforts begun in 2006 to identify and educate at-risk and vulnerable residents in Fairfax County. As no vaccine will be ready when a pandemic strikes, the cornerstone of prevention will be to educate the public to have seasonal flu immunizations, cover coughs and sneezes, wash their hands and keep their distance. Reaching the at-risk and vulnerable public with these prevention messages early in a pandemic will reduce illness and deaths.

The Fairfax County program will focus community outreach efforts on ethnic and non-English speaking populations and on people with special needs, including the elderly.

"To have a successful community response, the public must be well-informed," said Gloria Addo-Ayensu, M.D., MPH, Director of the Fairfax County Health Department. "This grant affords us the opportunity to build capacity within at-risk populations while continuing to reinforce pandemic influenza preparedness and other public health education messages."

The grant will assess current and proposed preparedness activities for use in other urban counties and uncover potential “best practices.”

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