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*Article Title:*

*Distribution in Emergency Preparedness: The essence of leadership*

Recently we remembered the anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 catastrophe. Our government spends countless dollars in the hopes to protect our nation. Yet deep inside we still ask ourselves, “How safe are we?” However, the residents of Will County may in fact be more prepared than many counties in the nation. Citizens of Will County recently received a newsletter from the Will County Health Department (WCHD) entitled, *Emergency Preparedness & Response*. The newsletter was filled with a variety of useful information that prior to 9/11 very few of us would have given it much thought.

One article in particular, “Will County’s Pharmaceutical Distribution Plan: Getting Medication to the People”, caught my attention as a logistics fanatic. The article prompted two thoughts: 1. How you would distribute medications to a population of 613,849 ([www.willcountyllinois.com](http://www.willcountyllinois.com)) in as short of time as possible; and 2. What makes the Will County distribution plan “a state model” (according to the Illinois Department of Public Health)?

Deon Pillard, the Will County Emergency Preparedness & Response Coordinator was gracious to provide some insight. Let me begin by saying that the interview was intense and extensive. Her role is “to coordinate, organize, develop, and facilitate all facets of the program from writing and developing Public Health emergency plans to organizing and managing program development, staff education and training, and general administrative duties as they relate to program facilitation and continuity”. Pillard truly knows her job and everyone in Will County should feel at ease knowing that she’s leading this project!

What makes for a “state model”? Pillard replied that “the funding, which came from the IL Department of Public Health via the Center for Disease Control & Prevention, that has assisted us in the development of our plans came in 2002 as a result of increased concern regarding Bioterrorism. We immediately put the wheels in motion to develop a plan that would provide for dispensing antibiotic medication to the citizens of Will County. That plan is called the Pharmaceutical Distribution Plan. Without compromising the security of the plan, the uniqueness is its ability to quickly provide medications to the “masses” if you will. We use a phased approach which very strategically and methodically can get medications to the people much quicker than many of the standard dispensing models that I’ve seen from across the Country. Also, the amazing cooperation that all County and Municipal agencies have provided truly makes this plan more unique. All agencies have

come together to ensure that moving the medications works smoothly and efficiently for our citizens. We have also drilled the plan which proved to us that the phased approach works well.”

It’s quite apparent that when funds were made available, no time was wasted in planning for a Bioterrorist attack. Also, rather than focus on traditional methods of distribution, the WCHD developed a flexible and effective operational plan by “thinking outside the box” – a critical skill for any organization to appreciate. Pillard commented that, “the key to developing good emergency preparedness plans is relationship building - getting to know those people that will support the response efforts *before* the emergency hits... Without getting to know the leaders in your community and those involved in your planning efforts, your plans could fail. One cannot develop comprehensive emergency plans in a vacuum. It may take only one individual to actually write the plan, and a team to develop it further, but it takes a community to make it work on “game day.”

Besides developing cooperative (or collaborative as we’ve discussed in previous months) relationships, Pillard also suggested the following key indicators for their plan - commitment, expertise, and leadership:

- “Staff that has written, practiced, and drilled the plan with amazing dedication and perseverance;
- The Will County Emergency Management Agency’s guidance and direction. The expertise that sits in their office is simply amazing and it should be a comfort to all Will County citizens that we have such a stellar agency steering the ship in all kinds of emergency situations; and
- WCHD Administration. Decisions are often difficult in both planning for and responding to emergency situations. Our Executive Director, Jim Zelko and Assistant Executive Director, John Cicero, have never wavered in their concern and support of properly and proficiently planning for all types of public health emergencies. A highly respected quality of their leadership is also their continual participation in all of our drills and exercises”.

Given the severe nature of Bioterrorism, I wanted to know what citizens of Will County can do to be better prepared. Pillard expertly suggested to “educate yourself not only about Bioterrorism and public health emergencies, but about all emergencies. Get to know what Will County has available to help you. There is wonderful information on many websites that can get you prepared at home and work for an emergency. Please work with us during an emergency – listen to the news, follow directions, and trust that we will work as hard and fast as we can to take care of you. Lastly, please give of your time and volunteer in our program. While our plans have been recognized by the State as “model” plans, they are only as good as the help we get from the citizens. The more people we can get to volunteer, the faster we can get those medications out to the people. As the country song says, “When faced with the decision to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance. We need your help.”

The idea of a Bioterrorist attack should raise our level of concern. Although no one can ever be 100% prepared for every sort of emergency event, based on the commitment and

leadership found in the WCHD's plan, we may be prepared. Hopefully this plan sits on a bookshelf and collects dust without ever being activated. But, in the event it's needed, it will be the overriding contributing success factors of *leadership and commitment* that may in fact save our lives.

For additional information regarding emergency preparedness & response:

Will County Health Department: [www.willcountyhealth.org](http://www.willcountyhealth.org)

Will County Emergency Management Agency: [www.willcountyma.org](http://www.willcountyma.org)

IL Department of Public Health: [www.idph.state.il.us](http://www.idph.state.il.us)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

Call 815-727-8802 if you are interested in volunteering.