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Carol Flores' Interview with City of Houston Public Health Preparedness October 24, 2014

1. What are the things that the Public Health Department is most concerned about regarding infectious disease in Houston?

One of the goals of the health department is to protect the community from disease. We do this by working in partnership with our local community and our colleagues at the state health department and CDC. We want to be sure that we have the information needed to reduce or prevent disease in our community.

Last week our director, Mr Stephen Williams, and our health authority, Dr David Persse, briefed Mayor Parker and City Council on Ebola. We are also monitoring other diseases that have been in the news such as EV-D68, the virus that causes severe respiratory illness in children. Ebola and EV-D68 are in the news in part because they're new and novel in the United States. But overall, the risk of any resident becoming ill with these diseases is fairly low. We are also concerned about diseases that are not as new and novel, but are more likely to cause illness in our community – diseases such as salmonella, which causes food poisoning, influenza, HIV, and others.

2. What happens on a regular basis to be prepared for these things?

On a daily basis, we investigate reports of infectious disease. We check if someone is ill, how they became ill, and if anyone else is at risk of becoming ill. When appropriate we recommend steps that can be taken to prevent the spread of the disease and sometimes we provide prophylaxis (medication or vaccines) to keep exposed people from getting ill.

We stay informed. We look at what is going on in our community and in those around us, as well as across the nation, and even internationally. We want to know what our community is experiencing now and what might be headed our way. We need to keep up to date with the latest science, so that we can have accurate information.

We plan with our partners. During the past few months we've done a lot of planning about Ebola. We are working with the medical community, EMS, airports, school districts, businesses, and other groups to be sure everyone is prepared and knows what to do if a case were identified in Houston or the surrounding area.

3. Recently, the CDC told faith leaders to “consider your ritual practices” as they concern potential public health issues. (i.e. common cup communion, “passing the peace” or other social/fellowship rituals, prayer mats, etc.) What would you like faith community leaders to think about in regards to religious practices?

We've all been thinking about Ebola as a public health concern, but I would ask faith community leaders to take a step back and consider their religious practices in the context of influenza or the common cold. Are there points in your practices that could be opportunities to spread the cold or the flu? Brainstorm ways that practices can be tweaked to still provide meaning and support to your communities while reducing the opportunity for disease spread. Some simple changes may include having single-use prayer mats, having hand sanitizer readily available both before and after communion, using disposable cups rather than common cup communion.

Remember also, that just as people shouldn't go to work when they're ill, they shouldn't attend religious services either. Look for opportunities to incorporate technology to deliver spiritual support to your community in a way that doesn't require a physical presence.

4. What role can local faith communities play in the prevention and containment of infectious disease? What role can they play in support of the Public Health Department?

Serve as a source of factual scientific information. There have been reports of people experiencing discrimination due to fears associated with Ebola. Educate yourself and your congregation about Ebola and other diseases. Information is available on the CDC's website at www.cdc.gov. You can also find a summary of Ebola facts on our website at www.houstontx.gov/health. Click on the “What You Need to Know About Ebola” link.

Beyond what's already been mentioned, encourage your congregation to practice healthy living. Know proper hand washing techniques, keep your immunizations current (including the annual flu vaccine), make good food choices, and incorporate exercise into your weekly routine. Encourage your congregants to stay home when they're not feeling well.

And finally, promote the key steps in overall preparedness: make a plan, build a kit, stay informed, and know your neighbors.

The health department has information on preparedness on our website at <http://www.houstontx.gov/health/public-health-preparedness>.

We have online videos in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese that go through the process of building an emergency preparedness kit. We've also recently added the Houston Emergency Preparedness Cookbook, which offers emergency preparedness tips as well as recipes for quick and nourishing food options for when you are without electricity. The cookbooks are available to be downloaded in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, and Urdu.

You can also get information on overall preparedness at www.readyhoustontx.gov