

Pandemic drill puts city, businesses to test



Christine Kosmos, deputy commissioner of the Chicago Dept. of Public Health (center), Leslee Stein-Spencer (right) of the Chicago Fire Dept. and members of five city departments watch a mock exercise of an avian flu pandemic unfold on their computer screens. (Tribune photo by Chuck Berman / December 6, 2007)

By Ryan Haggerty | Tribune staff reporter
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The effects of the computer-simulated flu pandemic kept getting worse and worse: highways and airports shut down, hospitals filled to capacity, pharmacies running out of medicine.

As the consequences of the virtual disease became direr, public and private officials taking part in an emergency-response drill Thursday got a taste of the high-pressure decisions they would have to make should such a disaster happen in Chicago.

Representatives of the city's Police, Fire and Public Health Departments, the Mayor's Office, the Office of Emergency Management and Communication and the business community sat at computers in the CNA Building, 333 S. Wabash Ave., evaluating on-screen information about the pandemic as it spread and making quick decisions about how best to deal with it.

About 100 employees of various city agencies and private businesses watched on projection screens as the officials decided how to respond to power outages, staffing shortages at police and fire departments and a lack of basic supplies at supermarkets.

"Decision-making is the critical thing here," said Len Pagano, president and chief executive officer of the Safe America Foundation, a sponsor of Thursday's exercise. "What we were doing was giving individuals the opportunity to [evaluate] the decisions they made."

When some participants said they were surprised at how quickly the situation was changing, the drill's director reminded them that a real pandemic would not present an opportunity for a time-out.

"It's the way the real world works," said Dennis Damore, senior director at Crisis Simulations International, which developed the simulation program.

Chicago is the first city to host the pandemic flu simulation, Pagano said. Philadelphia will carry out the program in February, while New York, Los Angeles and Atlanta are planning to do so later in 2008, he said.

After the drill, participants and observers evaluated the pandemic-response plans of a number of major corporations and discussed questions raised by the exercise.

The simulation allowed public and private officials to develop relationships that would be critical in the event of a real disaster, said Christine Kosmos, deputy commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health.

"City agencies need to be planning with businesses around issues like the pandemic flu," Kosmos said after participating in the simulation. "It was an interesting way to interact with each other and to have a better understanding of how decisions impact events, and how a decision would impact other people's decisions."

The simulation's organizers are planning a follow-up conference in Chicago in early 2008, Pagano said.

"One of the big concerns we have as a foundation is that there are too many things that have not been thought through yet," he said. "People don't know what would happen if schools were to close. How would the kids be taken care of? Would the parents have to stay home from work? There are some serious questions that need to be answered."