

PANDEMIC FLU PLANNING:
City bureaus aware of national plans

A REPORT FROM THE CITY AUDITOR
March 2007



Office of the City Auditor
Portland, Oregon



CITY OF
PORTLAND, OREGON

OFFICE OF THE CITY AUDITOR
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March 6, 2007

TO: Mayor Tom Potter
Commissioner Sam Adams
Commissioner Randy Leonard
Commissioner Dan Saltzman
Commissioner Erik Sten
Shawn Graff, Director of Portland Office of Emergency Management
Dave Sprando, Chief, Bureau of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services

SUBJECT: *City of Portland, Pandemic Flu Planning, Report #345*

This report provides a summary of what we learned from our work interviewing City managers and employees, to ask specific questions related to the national implementation plan for addressing a pandemic flu. Our report includes a summary of concerns expressed by managers and other employees.

The City must plan for an indeterminate number of different possible emergencies, of which a pandemic flu is just one. We understand that the City's emergency management planning is broad in scope. The scope of this report, however, is very focused because it documents work that we did at the request of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, as it studies federal planning for a pandemic flu outbreak.

We realize that much more can be done to audit the general state of emergency preparedness in the City of Portland, and we are considering options for such work.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance we received from personnel throughout the City in conducting this audit.


GARY BLACKMER
City Auditor

Audit Team: Drummond Kahn
Beth Woodward
Kari Guy

Attachment

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Introduction Preparing for an outbreak of pandemic influenza is becoming more important to federal, state, and local governments. National planning and coordination efforts have begun, and local governments like the City of Portland have key roles in the national pandemic flu plan.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines “pandemic flu” as:

“virulent human flu that causes a global outbreak, or pandemic, of serious illness. Because there is little natural immunity, the disease can spread easily from person to person.”

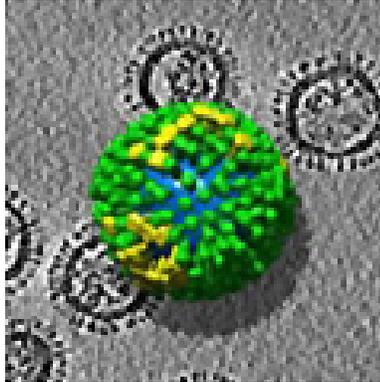
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov>, January 23, 2007

A pandemic, according to the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, could overwhelm our health and medical capabilities and “ultimately threaten all critical infrastructure by removing essential personnel from the workplace for weeks or months.”

In the Portland area, primary responsibility for health issues rests with Multnomah County, while the City retains responsibility for essential public works infrastructure and services such as water and sewer. Bureaus involved in response to fire and medical emergencies, and emergency management, are other key City programs currently planning for a possible pandemic outbreak.

In addition to those obvious government programs like health departments, that are necessary to include in pandemic influenza preparation, many other programs must also be prepared. Law enforcement, infrastructure maintenance, resource managers, and political leadership must all plan to be ready for the City’s response

and continuing operation in case a pandemic flu reaches Portland, or suppliers that our services depend upon.



Flu virus representation from U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Center

This report documents work we did at the request of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, to check City officials' knowledge of Federal planning for a pandemic flu.

Background

A critical and initial step in preparing for a pandemic flu outbreak is the planning process. The Federal government, through the Homeland Security Council, developed its National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza in November 2005, explaining the Federal government's approach to preparing for and responding to a pandemic, including Federal expectations for local jurisdictions such as Portland. In May 2006, the Homeland Security Council released the implementation plan for the strategy, which provides more specific expectations for all levels of government to help prepare for and respond to a pandemic. The plan includes key participation by local governments, and contains criteria for local governments' pandemic influenza plans to prepare themselves and their communities.

Also in May 2006, the City's Office of Emergency Management invited Multnomah County health officials to brief the City Council on the pandemic flu threat. Pandemic flu was discussed in many City bureaus and some began preparing bureau plans for responding to a pandemic flu breakout.

During 2006, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the investigative arm of the U.S. Congress, began to assess the nation's preparedness for a pandemic flu. It asked some local government audit offices, including ours, to participate in an initial survey of local officials, using consistent questions about local planning in the context of the national plan. GAO's purpose was to gather information that would help it plan a broader audit of Federal work to implement the National Strategy.

In December 2006, the City Auditor agreed to participate in GAO's effort to ascertain the status of State and local planning, by identifying and interviewing key City officials about their knowledge of the national pandemic flu plan. We agreed to share the results of our interviews with GAO, which plans to combine our results with those of other local governments (including, for example, Kansas City and Philadelphia) to study the extent to which local governments follow national flu planning and to identify recommendations to improve intergovernmental flu planning and coordination.

Objective, scope, and methodology

Our objective was to survey appropriate City of Portland officials to assess the City's overall awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the Federal pandemic flu planning process. We limited our survey to four questions suggested by GAO and used by other local government audit offices in order to expedite reporting our results to GAO in a form useful to the agency.

To accomplish our objective, we studied a City organization chart and contacted offices of responsible officials to test for awareness of planning needs, and to identify knowledgeable individuals. We conducted 20 telephone interviews of officials to ask them the survey questions. (Two other officials preferred to respond by email.) We documented contacts and completed interviews to the extent possible based on each respondent's knowledge.

We conducted, and are reporting on, additional work not requested by the GAO. We reviewed the national plans, initial GAO plans for the national survey, and City policy for emergency management. We also discussed our work with the Multnomah County Auditor's Office,

and conducted a follow-up interview with coordinating officials in the Office of Emergency Management to collect additional information about the City's planning and coordination processes.

The questions that we used in our interviews, provided by GAO, were:

Regarding the Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, by the Homeland Security Council, May 2006,

1. Are officials aware of the plan's provisions and stated expectations? To what extent? What is your organization's role or responsibility?
2. Which City officials did federal officials involve in developing, or starting to implement the plan? To what extent were they involved?
3. Have City officials identified any information needs, gaps in coverage, or other areas of concern regarding the plan or regarding federal agencies' roles and responsibilities?
4. Are City officials addressing actions and other criteria set forth in the implementation plan? To what extent? What is the scope of your organization's responsibility?

In January 2007, we contacted 22 City officials to ask these questions. The officials we spoke with represented the Mayor and City Commissioners' offices, and bureau managers and staff in eight City bureaus including:

- Office of Emergency Management
- Office of Management and Finance
- Police Bureau
- Bureau of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services
- Bureau of Environmental Services
- Office of Transportation
- Bureau of Emergency Communications
- Water Bureau

The survey questions were intended to gauge the general awareness and understanding by City officials of the Federal plan. We did not independently confirm the statements made by officials in the interviews. Additional audit work would be necessary to confirm Portland's specific level of flu preparedness.

We prepared a preliminary summary of the results of our survey and shared it with the GAO, in memorandum form, and made copies available to elected officials, POEM, and other government auditors conducting the survey.

We conducted our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results Based on the interview results, City officials are generally aware of the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza: Implementation Plan (May 2006) by the Homeland Security Council, that calls for local planning to prepare for an outbreak. About three-quarters of the officials we contacted were aware that Federal planning is occurring. Some officials and bureaus have extensive knowledge and have taken steps to plan and implement actions, while others are less familiar with the plan, but are also less responsible for pandemic-related activities. Nearly half of those we contacted are participating in implementing the National Plan.

Specifically, the Mayor's Office is coordinating with Multnomah County, the lead local government. The Director of the Portland Office of Emergency Management (POEM) serves as the principal strategic advisor to the Mayor and Council on emergency management matters, including pandemic flu preparedness and response plans. Knowledgeable officials we interviewed included POEM's Director and its Program Manager for Planning and Mitigation; the Chief of Operations for the Bureau of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services; the coordinator for Occupational Health and Infectious Disease Program; and the Emergency Manager for the Water Bureau. These individuals have specific knowledge of the National plan and are taking steps to implement it.

Examples of planning and implementation steps that have been taken by City of Portland officials are:

- The Fire Bureau and POEM participated in the Oregon Pandemic Flu Summit with Multnomah County, in March 2006.
- The City invited County health officials to give a joint presentation to the City Council in May 2006.
- The Office of Emergency Management has held meetings on how to implement the plan, and sent out an information sheet on pandemic influenza to all City employees when the guidance was released.
- The Chief of Operations for the Fire Bureau told us the bureau has prepared detailed plans to continue operations even if half of its work force is absent due to illness.
- The Water Bureau met with public health officials in April, 2006, to confirm information sharing practices. It has cross-trained key staff to enable continuity of operations, including laboratory staff and treatment plant operators.
- Officials from Risk Management and the Mayor's Office told us that they participated in state-wide planning exercises.
- The Office of Management and Finance is preparing, through a contractor, a plan for continuity of operations that will be useful to other bureaus in planning independently for continuity during a possible outbreak of pandemic flu.

Other positive aspects of the current state of the City's planning for a pandemic flu, described by officials in the interviews included:

- Officials are generally aware that POEM is Portland's lead organization and contact for pandemic flu and other emergency preparedness. Much of the planning by POEM for other emergencies is useful in planning for a pandemic flu. For example, staff at POEM, in Risk Management and other Bureaus has received National Incident Management System (NIMS) Incident Command System training.

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- POEM is coordinating the process of ensuring that every City bureau and office plans for a possible pandemic flu outbreak.
 - At least two key City bureaus have taken initiative to plan for their own response early in the City's pandemic flu planning process, and more have taken some steps toward planning.
 - Officials understand that Multnomah County is the assigned regional lead for pandemic flu. The City's website has an indirect link to current County influenza information.

In response to our questions about City officials' needs and concerns, they told us about some potential problems:

- Slow progress of planning for business continuity in the event of pandemic flu (how employees can work from home or remote locations if they are unable to get to work or told not to come to their offices).
- The low level of Federal involvement currently and when a pandemic flu outbreak occurs. A respondent told us that they felt the Federal message was "you're on your own." Another told us they have invited Federal representatives to participate in planning activities, but the Federal agencies do not attend.
- Lack of coordinated planning among Federal, State, and local organizations.
- Increased Federal planning requirements may be imposed without Federal assistance in implementation. For example, an expected requirement to create "social distancing" by closing schools may not provide guidance or assistance for alternatives.
- Loss of knowledge that occurs when there is staff turnover. In the course of our interviews, we found incidentally that staff transitions (retirements, promotions, or changes in duty) had affected the level of knowledge within some offices, confirming the concern expressed during an interview that such transitions affect planning for a pandemic flu.

In addition, some officials expressed concern about the level of medical supplies and services in the event of a pandemic flu:

- Will the State have sufficient levels of anti-viral medicines?
- Will the total capacity of hospital and emergency services be sufficient to handle the number of critically ill residents?
- Will vaccine distribution mechanisms be adequate?

Additional efforts

This review was limited to interviews with key City officials about their awareness and understanding of the federal pandemic flu plan. Additional future work could focus on the adequacy and effectiveness of the City's efforts to plan for a pandemic flu outbreak. Moreover, the scope of a pandemic flu would involve all levels of government, so further study of coordination among governments will be critical to ensure that efforts are not duplicated and effectively respond to a pandemic.

Conclusion

City officials we interviewed in the Mayor's Office and other key offices and bureaus are knowledgeable about the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan and are preparing to respond to a local breakout of pandemic flu. City officials expressed some concerns about the coordination with other government agencies and with the extent of preparedness. While most City officials we interviewed were aware of pandemic flu planning efforts, some of the officials were not aware of the national plan and the City's efforts to implement it. Through close coordination with the Office of Emergency Management, all bureaus can improve their own preparedness and, therefore, the preparedness of the City as a whole.

National compilation of similar surveys in other cities, counties, and states will be important to nationwide preparedness for pandemic flu. The City of Portland may be able to apply practices described by other cities through the GAO's national work on pandemic flu preparation when it is reported.

We asked the Mayor's Office, the Director of POEM, and the Fire Bureau to review and comment on this report, and met with them. The Mayor's letter of response is attached.

The Director of POEM said that this report accurately reflects his understanding of the current status of planning for a pandemic flu. He expressed concern that specific City attention to one threat, like pandemic flu, may obscure the importance of planning for other emergencies. POEM coordinates planning that could address many other possible types of emergencies, such as water contamination, earthquake, and drug-resistant tuberculosis. The City's plans must be structurally sound and adaptable to any emergency. The Director suggested that we consider performing a broader audit of City emergency preparedness.

The Fire Bureau Operations Chief indicated that he and the Fire Chief also agreed with the information in this report, as it applies to the Bureau. He would like to see increased participation by other bureaus in exercises to prepare for a pandemic flu outbreak.

RESPONSE TO THE AUDIT



Office of Mayor Tom Potter
City of Portland

February 21, 2007

Gary Blackmer
City Auditor
1221 SW 4th Avenue, Room 140
Portland, Oregon 97204

Dear Gary:

Thank you for your report on the City's awareness of the national planning and coordination efforts for a pandemic flu emergency. I am pleased that the City offices and bureaus you interviewed as part of this audit were knowledgeable about the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan and of their role in preparing to respond to a local breakout of pandemic flu.

This audit is also reminder that there is still work to be done to ensure the City is fully prepared for any emergency – not just a pandemic flu event. I realize there is a need for more effective coordination with federal, state and other local government agencies. I am also aware that the City needs to take action to bolster its overall level of emergency preparedness.

I look forward to further reviews of the City's pandemic flu preparedness and am confident that the Portland Office of Emergency Management (POEM) – in collaboration with our federal, state and local partners – is on the right track towards increasing the City's ability to respond to a pandemic flu event.

Sincerely,

Tom Potter
Mayor

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*City of Portland Preparing for Pandemic Flu Emergency:
Key bureaus implementing U.S. Department of
Homeland Security plans*

Report #345, March 2007

Audit Team Members: Beth Woodward, Kari Guy

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Gary Blackmer, City Auditor
Drummond Kahn, Director of Audit Services

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