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National Preparedness

Smart Practices Spotlight

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Bioterrorism Exercise Vaccinates 5,000 Against the Flu Baxter County, Arkansas

***Summary:** In possibly one of the first exercises of its kind, the Baxter County Health Unit, a division of the Arkansas Department of Health, combined an important public health initiative with a bioterrorism preparedness exercise. By using real flu vaccinations in the exercise, the county was able to address a possible flu outbreak while practicing processes for vaccinating large numbers of area residents.*

Developing a plan to prevent the spread of a potential flu outbreak, Baxter County, Ark., officials seized the opportunity to provide a valuable public health service and bolster county preparedness through a joint flu inoculation/mock mass vaccination exercise. The county designed a bioterrorism exercise that would test its ability to inoculate a large number of citizens by offering the flu vaccine, free of charge, to local members of the community.

The exercise was designed to be as authentic as possible to replicate a real bioterrorism emergency. Patients entered the complex, staged on the county fairgrounds, and were directed to a mock triage center. Assessed for the likelihood they had been exposed to a biological toxin they were sent either to the general area or the "sick" area, where they were given vaccinations. Meanwhile, the local Sheriff's Office stood guard over the precious stores of vaccine.

More than 5,000 citizens took part in the exercise and were inoculated against the flu. The exercise brought together more than the general public, however. A number of agencies and organizations played critical roles in the exercise, from local government officials to community hospitals and voluntary organizations, media representatives, and even the county judge.

The multi-agency involvement was one of the exercise's biggest successes, said Baxter County Health Administrator Richard Taffner. "Because of all the entities involved, we were able to identify areas that we need to expand and change," he said. "We had everyone involved, from the garbage disposal services to the National Guard." Most importantly, he added, the exercise involved a detailed debrief that highlighted the successes of the vaccination/exercise and also identified specific areas for improvement.

Thinking Locally:

How can you integrate public health initiatives with your preparedness exercises?
How can you create more public interest in your preparedness initiatives?

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