

## **RAMSEY COUNTY ANTICIPATES AN EVENTUAL PANDEMIC**

### **Whether it's a bird flu or other emergency, the County is preparing**

by John Fineberg  
Ability Communications and Training  
Oct. 19, 2006 Draft

---

Most of us have now heard of avian influenza, also known as the "bird flu." So far, avian influenza has been a virus only found in birds thousands of miles away in Asia, Europe and Africa. But, since birds have no boundaries, wild birds may spread the virus to wild and domestic birds in North America.

There is concern that one strain of flu virus, the "H5N1" virus, which is particularly dangerous to birds, might reach us sometime in the near future. Even worse, it could evolve from a bird pandemic (worldwide epidemic) into a deadly human pandemic.

"We need to be prepared, as individuals and at various levels of government," says Robert Einweck, public health preparedness coordinator for St. Paul-Ramsey County Department of Public Health. From the County Manager and the Board of Commissioners to the Mayor and the City Council, public officials are working to clearly understand their specific roles during a pandemic, including communicating critical information to constituents.

Whether it is a bird flu pandemic or other type of disaster, history tells us that disasters do happen, even in Minnesota. No one knows the severity of the next flu pandemic, but it's clear that massive sickness and death will ensue. "Unlike a blizzard that inconveniences us for a day or two, with a pandemic we can expect a wave of six to eight weeks and, potentially, a subsequent wave at a later time," Einweck warns. This presents numerous and complicated challenges that need to be addressed in government and personal emergency preparedness.

Part of the preparation is anticipating dilemmas brought about by high rates of absenteeism. Because everyone will be encouraged to practice "social distancing" (staying away from public gatherings), the questions about who will provide essential services are endless. How can official meetings take place when quorums can't be met? With workforce shortages, who will operate technology systems? Who will carry out public works? Who will provide public safety services? With parents and child protection personnel incapacitated, who will provide for children?

To prepare, the Department of Public Health is conducting an extensive continuity of operations assessment. Each of the 30 departments is charged with

looking at how they may continue to provide core services over an extended period of time.

“It’s true that we don’t have all of the answers,” Einweck admits openly. “No one could be totally prepared for the unknown. But we want you to know that we are focused on the task and doing the best we can to address the needs of County residents. And, regardless of what the next pandemic turns out to be, we suggest that you do what you can as individuals to stay healthy, and stock your homes with at least two weeks worth of food, water and other essentials.”