

Terror fight demands teamwork

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By Julie Patel

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When Evanston Police Cmdr. Dennis Nilsson saw investigators on television wearing what looked like spacesuits as they checked the Capitol building for anthrax, he wondered whether he had done right by his officers, who only wore rubber gloves and surgical masks as they opened possibly contaminated mail.

Nilsson said he wished he had better direction from the federal government in the war on terrorism.

"We felt alone," said Evanston Fire Department Chief John Wilkinson.

Nilsson and Wilkinson were among witnesses at a congressional hearing Tuesday in Chicago on the need for better coordination between federal and local officials.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) called for the hearing after the FBI's warning about possible terrorist attacks over the July Fourth holiday.

Dr. Arthur B. Schneider, chief of endocrinology at the University of Illinois College of Medicine, said the government can take simple measures to prepare, but it hasn't.

For example, he said, a nuclear explosion or an attack on a functioning nuclear power plant would release radioactive iodine. Internal or external exposure to the substance can cause thyroid cancer.

The cancer can be avoided by distributing potassium iodide tablets to people within a 50-mile radius of nuclear plants and stockpiling the tablets for those in a 200-mile radius, he said. But Illinois, unlike some other states, is not receiving potassium iodide from the federal government, despite its concentration of nuclear power plants.

Potential public health problems don't end there.

The combination of a severe nursing shortage, a lack of doctors in poor rural and urban areas, and emergency room closures may prove disastrous if the Chicago area is attacked, said Dr. Quentin Young, chairman of the Health and Medicine Policy Research Group.

The lack of coordination among governmental departments and a lack of unity about how prepared they want to be also presents a problem, said JayEtta Hecker, director of physical infrastructure at the General Accounting Office. This could leave the public feeling nervous about not knowing who's accountable for what, she said.

For police and fire departments, the lack of resources and training to deal with potential attacks is exacerbated by the fact they may receive contradictory information, or none at all, from the government, Nilsson said.