

Local agencies, lawmakers on West Nile virus

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County, state and local health department officials have assured the public that they are better prepared to battle the West Nile virus this summer than they were during last summer's outbreak.

But legislators who heard those assurances at a Skokie forum demanded public health officers and others improve communication with each other and the public.

They wanted answers on why communities including Evanston and Skokie were "hot spots" in the summer of 2002.

"We need to find out why ... so we don't have hospitals full like they were last summer," said State Rep. Beth Coulson, R-17th, of Glenview.

Coulson joined State Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-8th, of Evanston, State Rep. Julie Hamos, D-18th, of Evanston, State Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-57th, of Northbrook and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, of Evanston at the forum.

Cook County commissioners Larry Suffredin, D-13th, of Evanston and Joan Murphy, D-6th, of Crestwood also attended.

Linn Haramis of the Illinois Department of Public Health told the legislators and an audience of about 100 that he had no crystal ball about how or when the virus might hit this summer. But "a conservative, safe decision is to assume it will be here," he said.

Investigators discovered in areas hit by the virus far more water-filled catch basins than expected near roads and in back yards. The higher number of breeding pools for Culex mosquitos - which carry the virus to birds, animals and humans - might be one reason behind the local outbreak, he said.

Education was a priority for Schakowsky, who said after the forum, "We need to engage in community outreach education. Particularly in our area, we need to do it in foreign languages as well."

Schakowsky is a sponsor of HR 342, which would provide matching grants for combating the disease to local governments. It passed the House and awaits action in the Senate.

Stephen Martin, director of the Cook County Department of Public Health, joined most other speakers Monday in saying the public needs to be told how to avoid infection and reduce mosquito breeding.

Lowell Huckleberry, Skokie Health Department director, and Jay Terry, Evanston Health Department director, said their staffs spent hundreds of extra hours tracking infected animals and humans, while getting education to the public on how to prevent mosquito infestations or bites.

Huckleberry said the higher numbers of victims in Skokie (48 infected and one fatality) could have been partly because of the population's higher awareness and eagerness to be tested.

Terry said Evanston ended the year with 47 known disease victims and one fatal case, "but many of those who were infected are struggling to this day with the long term neurological impact of the disease."

Schoenberg has sponsored a state Senate bill to dissolve Cook County's four abatement districts and give their power to the county board. He indicated it might be time to rethink how to fund the West Nile virus fight.

"We need to rethink the administrative means by which we deploy our revenues. It's not just a question of more money for local health departments," he said.

Governor Rod Blagojevich's proposed budget includes \$3 million earmarked for the 2003 West Nile campaign. Last year, state and local officials had to take money away from other programs to deal with the disease. The North Shore Mosquito Abatement District, thrust into the public eye last year because of its responsibility to control mosquitos in north suburban Cook County, got a hostile reception Monday.

District Ecologist George Xamplas said the district has already sprayed Evanston, Skokie and Niles cemeteries to kill mosquito larvae, and has started its schedule of spraying district regions. It will spray for adult mosquitoes only as a last resort, he said.

Suffredin chastised the district for not staying in the information loop with other government bodies. He said the district failed to participate in a public meeting on spraying held April 29 in Wilmette by the League of Women voters. He also said the district's "miscommunication" on issues surrounding its mosquito campaign was compounded by policy decisions such as refusing federal money.

"You are just two employees and not the board, but I hope you'll take this message back, that if things don't change, there will be changes made," Suffredin told district representatives.