

Forum broaches threat of West Nile virus

'Tragic learning experience' last year brings local leaders together to plan'

By Graham Webster

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SKOKIE -- Mosquito season is coming, and the North Shore is preparing for what could be another summer plagued by the West Nile virus.

Public education and better communication among government organizations were main topics addressed by about 120 people during a forum, held at the Skokie Village Hall, 5127 Oakton St., Monday morning. The event, the North Suburban Forum on West Nile virus, was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill.

West Nile infected 884 Illinois residents and caused 64 deaths in 2002, according to the national Web site for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Officials said Cook County and the North Shore had especially high concentrations of infection.

"Last year was a tragic learning experience for us in this region," Schakowsky said.

It is necessary to communicate to the public how to prevent mosquitoes from spawning in standing water, speakers said. The news media, public service announcements, Web sites and municipal newsletters were cited as ways to inform the population.

"I think we've just been learning about the extent to which residential catch basins have contributed to the problem," said Jay Terry, director of Health and Human Services for the city of Evanston.

North Shore Mosquito Abatement District representatives said they are working on a public education campaign in area newspapers telling people how to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds in their yards.

Funding is another issue for agencies dealing with West Nile. The Illinois Department of Public Health, for example, diverted about \$1.9 million last year from its programs to fight West Nile.

"At this point we do not have any plans to provide funding in 2003," said Linn Haramis, an entomologist for the Public Health Department.

Under a new bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, Schakowsky said Illinois and other states will be able to receive federal grants to help fight mosquito-borne diseases such as West Nile. The Senate has not yet voted on the bill, known as the Mosquito Abatement for Safety and Health Act.

Haramis said West Nile likely will spread during the summer, affecting more states. "It will probably reach the West Coast this year," he said.

West Nile appeared in New York in 1999 and has been spreading ever since. In 2002 the CDC recorded one human case in California, and animals were infected in Washington.

Some elected officials present expressed concern over the effectiveness of the North Shore

Mosquito Abatement District, which is in charge of controlling the mosquito population in about a dozen municipalities, including Evanston.

"One of the things we learned is that the four (mosquito abatement districts) had different standards in testing," Terry said.

After questioning the district's public-education programs, Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin, D-Evanston, addressed two district representatives.

"It's important to us to help communicate that your organization is doing (its) job," Suffredin said. "But first we have to be confident you are doing your job."

Beyond administrative issues, some residents expressed environmental concerns over the use of pesticides used to kill mosquitoes.

"Their job is particularly hard in Evanston because we have equally passionate residents on both sides," Terry said.