

**LOCAL HEALTH AGENCIES NOT EQUIPPED FOR WEST NILE OUTBREAK, CONGRESS TOLD**

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The nation's health agencies are not equipped to cope with an epidemic like this summer's outbreak of West Nile virus in northeastern Indiana, Fort Wayne's top doctor told Congress Thursday.

Deborah A. McMahan, the commissioner of the Fort Wayne-AlLEN County Health Department, told a House panel that her agency and similar departments nationwide could not be effective without more employees and funding.

"While we are rich in talent and communication, we are significantly lacking in the human and economic resources," she told the House subcommittee that oversees government health programs. West Nile virus, which is carried by mosquitoes, has infected 2,530 people in 32 states this year. About 20 percent of people infected with the virus develop mild flu-like symptoms while one in 200 infected people become seriously ill.

Once confined largely to the northeast, West Nile virus has exploded nationwide this year. Among the 48 continental states, only Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington have not reported any cases of the virus in animals or humans this year.

Allen County leads Indiana with 50 reported human cases of the West Nile virus, which was first discovered in the United States in 1999. The virus has caused 125 human deaths this year, with three of those in northeastern Indiana.

GOP Rep. Mark Souder of Fort Wayne, the chairman of the House subcommittee, said the nation needs strong local health agencies to help combat West Nile and other epidemic illnesses.

"I have not seen an issue that has so rattled so many people as it has in my hometown," he said. "We need to work together as state and federal officials to fight West Nile the same way we have worked together to fight terrorism."

Though West Nile was first discovered in New York City and boomed earlier this year along the Gulf Coast, an official with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told the House panel that Midwestern states like Indiana, Michigan and Illinois are among the hardest hit by the virus.

"This is an area, for reasons we don't fully understand, that is prone to mosquito-borne viruses," said James Hughes, who heads the CDC's infectious diseases division. "We anticipated that this virus would move through the country."

Like other midwestern areas hard-hit by the West Nile virus this year, Fort Wayne saw a large outbreak of St. Louis encephalitis, a disease borne by mosquitoes that sickened more than 2,500 people in the mid-1970s, McMahan said.

The experience northeastern Indiana and other regions had with that nearly 30-year-old epidemic could help researchers trying to determine the best response to the current West Nile outbreak, witnesses told the House panel.

Lawmakers on the committee said the federal government may need to increase the amount it spends on West Nile treatment and prevention. Earlier this week, the House voted to authorize \$100 million in grants to communities developing mosquito-control programs.

But Congress should also help the public health agencies and hospitals that must respond to an epidemic, said Democratic Rep. Janice Schakowsky of Illinois, whose Chicago-area district has seen one of the highest concentrations of West Nile cases in the United States.

"We need a major new investment in our public health system," she said. "We need to provide all the funding necessary."