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HEALTH OFFICIALS SAY COMPUTER NETWORK MAY PROVIDE EARLY DETECTION OF AVIAN FLU

System Originally Designed to Track Bioterrorism by Monitoring 9-1-1 Calls

Washington, D.C. (Dec. 8, 2005) – For the second year in a row, public health officials around the country are using 9-1-1 call data to get an early warning on the outbreak of flu, especially important in view of the potential threat posed by the Avian Flu.

Officials in 18 communities in 12 states are tracking potential outbreaks using computer software that monitors calls to 9-1-1, watching for spikes in flu symptoms. Called the “Regional Influenza Network,” the communities involved share data with each other of patterns which indicate potential outbreaks, providing crucial hours or days of advance warning.

President George W. Bush, speaking at the National Institutes of Health, described early warning as an essential weapon in fighting an outbreak. “Early detection is our first line of defense," he said. “No nation can afford to ignore this threat.”

The network uses FirstWatch® Real-Time Early Warning™ software to automatically monitor live data in 9-1-1 computers, watching for increases in specific symptoms, including respiratory problems, abdominal pain, headache and other indicators associated with the flu, whether they appear in geographic clusters or across the entire population being monitored.

FirstWatch was first installed in Kansas City, Mo., in 1999, to spot potential bioterrorism attacks, and is currently used by cities, counties and public health districts in 21 states, protecting more than 20 million people, said FirstWatch chief executive officer Todd Stout.

“Because FirstWatch monitors trends using real-time data, it lets public health personnel know there’s a threat they need to look at much earlier than if they were waiting for lab results or reports from doctors’ offices,” Stout said. “Combining data from different cities, as we’re doing with the flu-tracking network, makes it even more powerful.”

“This real-time network lets us track influenza, whether it’s the avian strain or the conventional type, as it moves across the other jurisdictions in the network,” said Dr. German Gonzalez, District Epidemiologist for the North Central Health District in Georgia. “Both influenza and bioterrorism are likely to be multi-jurisdictional, striking health districts that are related geographically but have different systems for tracking disease and health threats,” Gonzalez said. “This network gives us a big picture of what’s truly going on around the country instead of a small snapshot of our own system,” he said.

FirstWatch alerted medical officials in Tulsa, Oklahoma City and Richmond, Va., to unexpected flu outbreaks in November 2003. The flu network represents the first time that the software's users have collaborated on such a project. Officials in other cities and counties have already expressed an interest in joining the network, Stout said. Current communities in the network include: Bergen County, NJ; Boone County (Columbia), MO; Bowling Green, KY; Charleston County, SC; Des Moines, IA; Ft Wayne, IN; Ft Worth, TX; Independence, MO; Johnson County, KS; Kansas City, MO; Macon, GA; Oklahoma City, OK; Plano, TX; Savannah, GA; Sedgwick County, KS; Sussex County, DE; Long Island, NY and Tulsa, OK.

FirstWatch software tracks more than 3,000,000 calls to 9-1-1 Call Centers per year, making it the largest and most comprehensive database of its kind. The company is based in Encinitas, Calif.

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