

Alameda County shines in study on contagious disease response

(01-02) 13:19 PST SAN FRANCISCO -- Most public health departments are not meeting U.S. guidelines for quickly handling cases of contagious diseases, and a good number are ignoring phone calls from doctors reporting possible outbreaks, according to a national study published Wednesday.

The good news is that at least one Bay Area agency - the Alameda County Public Health Department - was a top performer in the study.

The San Francisco Department of Public Health, which was not part of the study, relies on a reporting system that researchers say is ideal.

"You can't have delays," said Dr. Muntu Davis, head of the division of communicable disease control and prevention for Alameda County. "If you're talking about disease reporting, a lot of times it's time sensitive, and you want to jump on it and get as much information as soon as possible so you implement correct disease control measures."

The Rand Corp. study tested the disease-reporting systems at 74 public health departments selected at random. Researchers found that two-thirds of health departments they surveyed did not return phone calls from doctors reporting possible outbreaks within the 30-minute window recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But more disturbing is that nearly 40 percent of the health departments never returned at least one phone call from a doctor reporting a possible outbreak.

"Local public health agencies are basically the first line of defense in an emergency. The public rightfully expects their health department will be there for them, and the first thing is to pick up the phone and respond to an emergency," said David Dausey, an associate policy researcher for Rand and lead author of the study, which is being published Wednesday in the American Journal of Public Health.

"We found that that doesn't happen, or doesn't happen with the frequency and regularity that we would hope," he said.

The Alameda County Public Health Department, which was involved in the survey, was one of only five agencies that received the highest score from doctors

In San Francisco, public health officials set up a dedicated phone line, which is answered either by a receptionist or an answering service after hours.

In other words, in both departments a live person will answer the call around the clock.

"We basically try to call them back immediately," said Sandra Huang, director of communicable disease control units for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. "We have no way of knowing whether it's super urgent or not, so we have to call back right away. We figure if the doctor took the time to call us, they need a response immediately."

Online resources

San francisco's public health disease reporting page can be found at:

links.sfgate.com/ZB1Q

Alameda county public health department can be found at:

links.sfgate.com/ZB1R

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