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Fort Worth News

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Bioterror plans include volunteer aid

By Mitch Mitchell
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

FORT WORTH - The Texas Department of Health is seeking people who can volunteer to distribute medicine in case of a biological emergency in this region.

Math and communication skills are a must, and applicants must be able to lift packages up to 40 pounds, travel on a moment's notice and work well under pressure. Volunteers must be 18 or older, and it would be nice if they are amateur radio operators.

"We're probably talking about 250 people who we will need to train," said Gloria Reeves, chairwoman for the Tarrant County Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, a nonprofit group that coordinates the area's volunteer response to natural disasters.

For example, if a call goes out about an anthrax release in the region, information would be relayed from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to state and local health departments, Reeves said. Local officials would then call Reeves, who would instruct volunteers to meet at predetermined locations, where they would repackage large boxes of medicine and ship it to the county health departments that need it.

Volunteers will probably receive cultural competency training and basic first aid, Reeves said.

The teams will cover a 50-county distribution area that is now the responsibility of state Health Department staff, Reeves said.

"They have a program, of course, and now they are looking to add manpower," Reeves said. "And they want that manpower trained."

Members of the Texas Department of Public Safety disaster emergency management team would assist in the medicine distribution mission, said Marco Montes, risk communications coordinator for Health Department Regions 2 and 3.

"We've done a lot of pre-planning," Montes said. "We have staff in place at the regional, county and city level, meaning that we are more prepared to react to a biological incident.

"But any additional effort and support will strengthen our reaction time. By no means can we build our plans on volunteers, but we can add them to our plans."

Edward Kaplan, a professor of public health at Yale University who has studied the anthrax letter attacks after 9-11, said how quickly

local governments can distribute medicine during a biological emergency has always been a concern.

"The idea of bringing in volunteers to do this is valid because you want to leave the medical folks doing only what they can do," Kaplan said. "With something like this, you might want to have the people at FedEx or UPS come in and bring their expertise to bear.

"The thing that is absolutely key in dealing with a disease like anthrax is getting started with the antibiotics quickly. Time wasted at the beginning can translate directly into lives lost."

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