

8-3-12 Of Mosquito Wings and Other Things

What happens during unusual and unexpected circumstances is especially challenging for public health emergency responders. Was there enough time to prepare? Was there enough information to pass on to residents? This year's early arrival of EEE in high numbers and in mammal biting mosquitoes was, as you probably know by now, unprecedented. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) scrambled to get the information out to health agents via our alert system of phone calls and emails. We also participated in several conference calls to learn the details and the urgency of the situation.

By the time the decision was made to conduct an aerial spraying, we had very little notice and did not know on which night which town would be sprayed. It was not until Friday evening, the first night of the spraying, that we received a recorded call of a tentative schedule. It seemed to me that the use of "Reverse 911" calls with tentative schedules would create more confusion rather than clarification. The thought of daily "Reverse 911" calls with new and changed information from the day before, also seemed unwise, creating frustration and skepticism and lack of faith in government officials. Some towns did use the Sheriff's Department to send the calls to their residents. Some of those calls were not repeated the next day with updated information and, as a result, the residents were actually misinformed. It was very challenging for all health agents to inform everyone of every piece of related information. In addition to the announcement of the spraying and the reason for it (EEE), there was other related important information: the pesticide, its dosage, the determined safety of it according the Environmental Protection Agency, and the personal choice of precautions to be taken, if so desired.

The highlights of a complex situation were described on roadside signs, telephone answering machines, sent out by group emails and bannered on the homepage of the Town website. The Halifax Board of Health is blessed with a talented administrative assistant who updated our website to include links to all the details on DPH's website. This year's communication offered something new: DPH had an interactive map showing the towns to be sprayed and the option of seeing the area that had been sprayed the night before.

Despite the efforts of many to inform the public as well as we could in a rapidly developing situation and its tentative response plans, many residents were angry at not being better informed and in some cases, more precisely informed. The week after the aerial spraying for EEE was an interesting one; returning calls to angry residents is not an easy task. Some were downright rude, hanging up at the attempt to explain the challenges. Others were more sympathetic when hearing of the tentative schedule. Others calmed down when it was explained that the dose is "ultra low volume", about ½ ounce per acre, and the product and dose is exactly the same as used by the Mosquito Control Programs all summer long by truck. I have never once received a call asking if they should close their windows and shut off their air conditioner when their yard is sprayed.

My favorite call was by a daughter who listened to our message on the answering machine explaining that the aerial spraying for EEE was scheduled to begin on Friday, July 20, continue on Saturday, July 21 and possibly a third night as well. The daughter was recorded talking to her mother as she said, "Mom, I told you the message was there!"

Some residents gave me feedback on DPH's interactive map, telling me it was great and they really appreciated it! We contacted a few towns that did send one Reverse 911 to see if they then sent another when plans were changed. Some towns did not. To add to the complexity of weather and time, some towns in the middle section were to be partially sprayed one night and partially sprayed another night. Halifax was one of those towns. There was no way I could let people know who would and who wouldn't receive the spray on which night.

Doing our best is all we can promise. The Sheriff's Office has a different method for sending out these calls than when H1N1 was around and some of us were denied the use of the system. The speed is there for high numbers of calls now. And when I have enough accurate information to send out, I'll use that method in addition to the others. Then, that will be one other way of doing the best we can do.

In the meantime, the beat goes on, of mosquito wings and other things. Easton is still a hotspot for EEE. If you are visiting other towns, pay attention to DPH's arbovirus surveillance information this year because the insects are keeping us busier than usual! See the mosquito trapping and testing results at <http://westnile.ashtonweb.com/index2.asp>

For ordering ground spraying of your yard, see the Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program at <http://www.plymouthmosquito.com/index.htm> or contact them at Phone: 781-585-5450 (8:00am - 3:00pm) or Fax: (781) 582-1276.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us