

8-31-12 Helping Hands in Time of Need

When I received the call last week from the Department of Public Health telling me that there was a mammal case of Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE), in this case, an alpaca, it still came as a shock even though this is really bad year for both EEE and West Nile virus (WNV). Easton has been this year's "hotspot" for EEE. They've been at critical risk for a while now, with EEE and WNV slowly spreading out to other communities. Halifax was at moderate risk, with EEE having spread from bird biting mosquitoes to mammal biting mosquitoes only recently. The call about the mammal case changed everything. We jumped from moderate risk to critical, completely skipping high risk. That large mammal, be it a horse or llama or alpaca, could just as easily have been a human. When a mammal biting female mosquito is seeking that blood meal, any mammal will do and the large ones are sometimes still out at night. Most animals are vaccinated, though, and, so, that alpaca served as a loud and clear sentinel: the area is at Critical Risk for human cases of Eastern Equine Encephalitis. And humans do not have a vaccination! We're left with education and action.

While Peggy was updating the website and I was on the phone and emailing, I knew that I could send out group emails, we could request the road side sign boards, send information to Comcast and contact large organizations with newsletters such as the Council on Aging and the Mobile Home Park. I could write the script for a reverse 911 call and we could request additional ground spraying from the Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program.

I also knew that I did not have the time to physically travel about town, to leave fact sheets and posters on the topic. Yet, it is critical to do so. Everyone sees and hears different aspects of their environment. Some see the news on television, others listen to the radio. Some read bulletin boards. One of the fastest methods of spreading the word is by word of mouth and when people are talking, if they can have the facts and contact information close at hand, then the word can also be accurate!

So, CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) to the rescue! I requested permission of our Emergency Management Director, Fire Chief Carrico to deploy CERT for posting notices and fact sheets about town. Three days later, they had distributed well beyond my original list of locations. The recipients were gracious and thankful for the update.

Two of the CERT members, Bill and Joyce Hay distributed the bulk of the flyers and it had personal meaning for them beyond awareness of the current situation. Back in 1981, when Joyce was visiting her father at Mount Sinai Hospital, the next bed over had a priest in coma from EEE. When he awoke, he was unable to feed himself or talk, the neurological damage was so severe. Joyce noticed the food trays being dropped off and being removed, when the man was

not able to feed himself. So, while Bill took over helping her father, Joyce started feeding and talking to this victim of encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain, in this case from the virus transmitted by a mosquito bite. By the time her father was able to leave and she had been helping this man for many weeks, she was able to re-teach him the sign of the cross but he was never able to exchange a single word of conversation with Joyce. Bill and Joyce were influenced by this unforgettable experience and now, thirty one years later it is as clear as yesterday; they want to do anything they can to prevent another case of this devastating disease.

I feel the same way that Joyce and Bill do; we want to prevent by informing people and urging them to take all the precautions available to prevent mosquito bites. In addition to personal protection measures such as using repellent, repairing screens and removing standing water, your local boards of health and our county and state authorities are also taking measures. At the state level, they have ramped up the amount of mosquito traps and the speed with which they process and analyze the information, including species of mosquitoes, weather conditions and level of virus. At the county level, the mosquito control programs are out every day (risking their lives, if you ask me), trekking into the swamps to collect mosquitoes from their traps, sorting them by species to send to the State lab and every day, early in the morning, conducting ground spraying by truck. At this point it is intensive widespread spraying.

At the local level, boards of health in high and critical risk areas are taking action to inform people of their risk, how to prevent it and by taking action over town owned lands by declaring dusk-to-dawn curfews, curtailments, bans and closures. Call it what you will, the intention is good and is aimed at not participating in health risks. Individuals may do what they wish on private lands but boards entrusted with protecting public health will, in times of critical risk, lend a helping hand and hold up a hand of refusal, also.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. Consider joining CERT. Call the Halifax Fire Department at 781 293 1751 to sign up for the next class starting Wednesday, September 5.