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A Sign for The Times

A few weeks back I sent out some group emails to practice my emergency notification contact list and also to practice something else. My request was for assistance in setting up the floor plan for an emergency dispensing site. The floor plan I designed was for circumstances with more dire consequences than the H1N1 is currently bringing. However, the possibility of this virus changing, where it becomes more deadly than it is right now, or of the appearance, at any time, of an illness requiring a speedier response continues to be on my mind. Those circumstances involve a complicated floor plan where people are triaged, the ill separated and sent home or to a hospital, the well people are screened for contraindications and medication is dispensed. In a perfect world, there is even a room for those who are in despair and trained people are there to help them. And because these emergency dispensing sites are thought to be 48 hour 'round-the-clock clinics, there are also staff break rooms, childcare and meal preparation and/or eating area.

This is what I have been taught for some years now. Prepare for a response to smallpox or the plague or to anthrax. The floor plan for these deadly situations is a complicated one, with lots of signage. Triage. Fill Out Form. Medical Evaluation. Medication. Wait Here. Behavioral Health Response. Staff Only. Bathroom. And there are lots of arrows.

Federal and State funding provided signs for these situations. They are white with black lettering, light-weight and durable. I'd like them to be larger but they'll do. (They're about 24" by 30".) There is one problem: no one thought of or provided a way to hang them up. There were no holes in the corners. Stands were not provided either.

I know of only a few people who have practiced their floor plan. One person told me, "As I watched from the sides to make notes for the documentation, I saw that taping signs to chairs with duct tape was not effective. As people began milling around, the signs were obstructed and many fell to the floor as the tape loosened. So, in our briefing, we decided to use color-coded helium balloons the next time for the various stations."

"Oh, oh!" I thought. We are in trouble if our emergency preparedness experts think we are actually going to be getting balloons filled in an emergency and color-coded, to boot!" An image of substituting sponge Bob Square Pants balloons for yellow and Princess balloons for pink flashed before my eyes and then, as thought that wasn't bad enough, the thought of them drooping as they deflated was too much. I had to come up with something more practical and reliable.

I decided to try out this floor plan, with the signs, see how long it would take to set up the traffic pattern and how many people I would need.

The practice went well for our first shot at this. I found that it takes two custodians about one hour to find and deliver from various locations in the school, some things I requested such as half walls and moveable chalkboards (a scarcity these days) to be used as dividers. I learned from the custodians how to roll back the bleachers, in case the floor space is needed.

The two CERT members, a selectman, an emergency preparedness contractor, a police officer and the police chief and myself were enough to set up chairs, line up the

dividers, place the signs and roll back the bleachers. Two hours is enough time for set up. A couple more people would be needed for setting up our several canopies outside the entrance. So, let's say, ten people and two hours. That's good news.

The bad news was the signs are important and hanging them needs improvement. On the morning of the exercise, I melted holes into the corners and centers of all the signs by heating an ice pick at the gas stove. (This was how I made bug boxes for my children from empty plastic peanut butter jars.) I found that I could melt right through at least three layers of signs at once. The holes were for wire. I had a small supply of the thin colorful plastic coated copper wire that used to carry our telephone messages before they were replaced by fiber optics. They've come in handy over the years and now they were put to use again. Duct tape going through a loop of wire would support the signs better than just taping one surface to another.

Next, I was in search of something tall, narrow, strong and light-weight to hold up the signs. Bamboo poles served the purpose but they were dependent on chairs for a base. The backs of chairs are angled, which left the signs angled. The Police Chief had a set of really cool collapsible flag posts. They were light-weight, durable, telescoping and sat on a tripod base. My wires wrapped around them and held the signs with duct tape very well. But, the poles were so light-weight, they tipped over easily and the telescoping aspect was useful for packing up and storing but were tricky to handle without them collapsing.

Since this exercise in creative thinking and making do, I have been on the lookout for sign poles. You know what? They are everywhere for people who use signs at their work place. That makes sense, of course; I just never paid attention to what held up a sign saying something is on SALE or Clearance or Holiday Special. Now that I see the perfect sign-posts in stores, I have begun to introduce myself to store managers. I want them to be aware of the need and have asked that if they ever are ready to throw them in the dumpster or recycling bin, to please contact their local board of health instead.

Will you keep your eyes open for me, too? I could use your help.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She believes being ready is a good thing and getting help with readiness is even better. Tell her your ideas at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us