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Health Department Holds Drill to Train in Outbreak Response

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 Written by MaryEllen Odell



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Prepare and practice were the key words at Putnam County's "Point-of-Dispensing" exercise held on Tuesday, May 1, at the Putnam Valley Senior Center. The drill, called a "POD" for short, was a medical countermeasure exercise which tested Putnam County's ability to dispense a vaccine for an outbreak of illness. It was conducted by the Department of Health along with local partners from Putnam's Bureau of Emergency Services, Sheriff's Department, Medical Reserve Corp, Department of Social Services and Mental Health, Department of Information Technology, the Office for Senior Resources, Putnam Valley Senior Center (PVSC) and the County Executive's Office. Observers from the New York State Office of Emergency Management and the NYS Police Office of Emergency Management were on-site to evaluate overall performance.

The drill puts staff through a test run, practicing different tasks they would need to complete in the event of a real-life problem. This year's scenario involved a 24-year-old male diagnosed with hepatitis A virus, who may have exposed residents while working at a local food market. Nearly 100 seniors participated by going through pre- or onsite registration, an interview conducted by nurses about medical history and possible exposure, treatment procedures and follow-up instructions. Skills in data entry, language translation, registration services, medical evaluation and treatment, and traffic control were all examined.

"An annual drill is required by NYS," said County Executive MaryEllen Odell, who participated both as patient and as the highest ranking public official overseeing the event. "Walking through first as a patient helped me gain the perspective of my constituents and how they would be treated in the event of such an outbreak. The planning by the health department and the inter-agency cooperation is substantial for these type of events. I am happy to report things went very smoothly. But we are always looking for ways to improve." Sam Oliverio, Supervisor for the Town of Putnam Valley, also participated to gain a first hand look, along with Jackie Annabi, from NYS Senator Sue Seriono's office, located in the PVSC.

"This drill for a Hep A outbreak was very timely," said Interim Health Commissioner Michael J. Nesheiwat, MD. "Last fall there were outbreaks in Westchester County and individuals were sickened from exposure in area restaurants. There the health department sprung into action, offering free hepatitis A vaccination to those at risk. This virus causes a person to experience abdominal pain, extreme fatigue and often jaundice, a yellowing of the skin and eyes. The best defense against it is to get vaccinated. And wash your hands well and frequently, particularly before eating."

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