

## Area health units prepare for outbreak

By **GREG MARTIN STAFF WRITER**

So far, no one in Florida has been diagnosed with a case of swine flu. But area county public health departments are ready to implement an emergency response plan should an outbreak occur.

Health department staffers from Charlotte, Sarasota and DeSoto counties said they've been participating in a statewide conference call with the Florida departments of health and emergency management each morning since the outbreak first became a national concern last Friday.

The health staffers are also staying in contact with local emergency management officials, hospitals and physicians to keep them informed of public health protocols concerning swine flu, said Melissa Sanders, public health planning director for DeSoto County.

If local physicians find themselves treating a possible case of the illness, the health department can send samples to a lab in Tampa to confirm the diagnosis, she said.

"Right now, it's all just in surveillance mode," Sanders said.

At the Charlotte health unit, administrators were set to hold a briefing session with staffers Wednesday afternoon, said Adam Dubois, information specialist for the unit. The intent is to prepare to activate an emergency operation plan, if people start becoming sick, he said.

The response would be similar to any influenza outbreak. However, the swine flu also raises some additional concerns.

"Flu season is over and all of a sudden we're having a outbreak," Dubois said. "That indicates there's a flu out there and it's living outside flu season."

Sarasota County epidemiologist Scott Pritchard said this week that, while emergency officials don't know the full spread of the virus, there has been routine surveillance ongoing in the county. He said the annual flu season is abating, so any sudden change in those presenting flu-like symptoms will be scrutinized.

Sarasota County Health Department officials say they have increased disease monitoring capabilities by alerting health-care providers, including sentinel flu physicians and local hospitals.

Sarasota is also making an effort to get additional support from the Medical Reserve Corps, a group of health-care professionals who have been trained for potential public health emergencies.

Sarasota Memorial Hospital reported Wednesday it has put a screening system in place to help identify patients with flu-like symptoms who may have been exposed to swine flu. Any patients admitted with signs of the flu will be directed to an Emergency Care Center for assessment, hospital officials said. Specimens from suspected cases will be sent to state labs for testing. The hospital has also increased its supply of surgical masks and is updating fit-testing of special respirator masks.

People with flu-like symptoms who have traveled to Mexico or come into contact with someone who has within the past seven days should contact the health department or their local physicians for additional information, said Dubois.

"What we don't want people to do is congregate in the emergency room with their flu," he said.

To date, the swine flu has caused one death in the United States, a 23-month-old child in Texas.

The health departments and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are updating their Web sites periodically to provide information to both patients and physicians.

To reduce chances of infection, people should wash hands frequently and sneeze into a tissue or sleeve, according to Dubois.