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Summit helps local officials and industry leaders prepare for pandemic influenza

HHS Deputy Secretary Azar and DHSS Commissioner Jackson sign planning agreement detailing federal and state roles in the event of pandemic influenza

(Juneau, Alaska) – An estimated 300 state officials, local government leaders, heads of private industry and other stakeholders from Alaska gathered in Anchorage for the Pandemic Influenza Summit on Thursday, April 13. The goal of the summit, co-sponsored by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service (HHS), was to focus attention on the need for Alaska’s leaders to plan, prepare and respond in the event of an influenza pandemic.

“A flu pandemic could present particularly difficult challenges for Alaska because our state depends on a transportation infrastructure and suppliers far from our local communities for everything from medical supplies to food items and heating oil,” said Alaska Health and Social Services Commissioner Karleen Jackson. “Pandemic planning needs to address how schools, businesses, public agencies, faith-based organizations and others participate in the event of a world-wide outbreak.”

Jackson explained that, unlike a fire or earthquake, a pandemic would likely affect most American cities all at once and would have a massive impact on the American workforce and those who rely on it. She also underscored the importance of ensuring that essential services, such as transportation, utilities and communications, keep operating without interruption during a possible pandemic.

In her brief address to the gathering, Senator Lisa Murkowski emphasized the need for collaboration between state and local governments. She entreated Alaska’s entities to form partnerships that would effectively bring more human and financial resources to statewide preparedness efforts.

U.S. Health and Human Services Deputy Secretary Alex Azar urged Alaska’s leaders to consider a flu pandemic as a real possibility and to start planning how they will respond should it become a reality. He also told the gathering that it would not be logistically possible for the federal

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government to immediately assist states if a pandemic were to occur. He suggested that as state and community leaders plan for a pandemic, they assume that Alaska and its communities will need to fend for themselves for the first three months of a pandemic.

During the Summit, Jackson and Azar signed an agreement that outlines the responsibilities of federal and state governments. Under the agreement, HHS will provide Alaska with technical guidance, funding and a supply of antiviral drugs. In turn, Alaska agrees to develop a comprehensive plan for responding to pandemic flu and hold exercises to test its plan.

According to the state's Public Health Director, Dr. Richard Mandsager, the federal government has already contributed \$650,000 to help Alaska's preparedness efforts. The state unveiled its statewide pandemic influenza preparedness plan last January and created a special web site that offers the most up-to-date information about the state's preparedness efforts. Mandsager added that beginning this month and continuing through the summer, the state will hold training sessions for key local services workers to learn how to prepare their communities for a pandemic or other health-related disaster.

"Unlike preparing for the usual kinds of disasters that face communities, pandemic planning requires communities to look within to what expertise and resources they have on hand to help themselves, without the expectation that they will be rescued immediately," Dr. Mandsager said.

Panel discussions on planning and preparedness, and how that might differ in rural versus urban settings, were held throughout the day.

For more information regarding pandemic influenza and Alaska's preparations and plans, visit www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov. For more information about human health and flu pandemic preparedness, please call 1-888-9-PANFLU. To report sick or dead birds, please call 1-866-9-BRDFLU.