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Health department hosted meeting for public on disaster preparedness activities

August 9, 2011

By KATINA TENGEDAL - Staff Writer (ktengedal@minotdailynews.com) , Minot Daily News

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The North Dakota Department of Health hosted a public educational meeting Monday about emergency preparedness activities. The meeting was held through videoconference and teleconference so people from across the state could listen in.

"We wanted to see if there are any perceptions or improvements that the public has in regarding health and safety response to disaster," said Tim Wiedrich, section chief of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section of the health department.

"We came through a major flood response this year, and in many respects that is still continuing. This is more high profile than a typical year," he added.

Wiedrich explained that the health department had begun planning in January for a large-scale flood response.

The public meeting described aspects to the planning that the health department underwent, which included collaboration with federal, state and local officials.

Communications was a key focus in planning. The health department established statewide tactical communications with a secure, redundant system in order to reach all health units, hospitals, health department entities and local government through videoconferencing and webcasts.

In addition to those communications, the department established a trailer based tactical communications system with satellite communication capability.

The department also established a patient tracking system, so patients in hospitals could be entered into a central database and tracked as they moved throughout the health-care system.

In order to fill needs for medical supplies, the state health department established a medical cache in a 30,000-square-foot warehouse. The cache of supplies is relied on during public health emergencies. The department also prepared to establish tent sheltering for a pre-hospital staging area, and bus conversion kits to convert school buses into wheelchair or stretcher transport units.

Other components of the plan included establishing planning and resource contracts, developing a medical reserve corps, and preparing rapid training for health-care professionals.

"We think that it (the planning for this year) went very well. We had a significant task in front of us, with these extraordinary circumstances that happened in this state. The people, both at the local and state levels, rose to the occasion," Wiedrich said.

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