

PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS TRAINING FOR ARLINGTON COUNTY, VA SCHOOLS

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In September 2004, Arlington County's School Health Bureau in the Public Health Division of the Department of Human Services in partnership with The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services and representatives from the local fire and police departments, who are assigned to the County Office of Emergency Management (OEM), developed and presented a pilot training program for the school staff of McKinley Elementary School on Public Health Preparedness. Since the events of September 11, 2001, public health has emerged as an integral part of the response to any emergency and central to all community activities. Public health plays a vital role within every community and is prevention-oriented. Public health preparedness is being ready to mobilize the resources of public health in order to restore services and to protect the health of the public from further risk in an emergency. Schools, in addition to their main educational component, play a vital role in protecting the public health of children (1, 2,3). Arlington County is unique in that fire, police and public health have already made great inroads in working collaboratively. In fact public health has representation in the OEM. The objective of Arlington County Pilot Training on Public Health Preparedness was to instruct school staff in public health principles and emergency management and introduce key officials in charge of managing an emergency event to the school staff, emphasizing a county team approach. The two-hour session was the first training of its kind for Arlington school staff on public health preparedness and is a model for similar training throughout the nation. The school staff completed a survey prior to the training, in which they identified specific areas of concern in the procedures and processes of dealing with an emergency event. School staff identified the need for information on Weapons of Mass Destruction as well as information on how to best address more common public health issues, such as influenza. Based on evaluations, the training was very well received, and Arlington County is in the process of planning similar training sessions for all the schools in their jurisdiction. A key component of the training was educating school staff on what they had to do to prepare their families in the event of an emergency, stressing the importance of discussing plans in advance with family members.

The major objective of this project was to inform the school community of Arlington County's efforts in public health emergency preparedness. This type of collaboration between universities and local governments will strengthen the capacity of a school system to protect the health of children and those who care for them in the event of an emergency. Informing school employees of emergency procedures prior to an event and empowering them to be part of an emergency response effort will improve school staff retention and improve interactions between local entities in the event of a response. In addition, this effort is a model for creating a national framework for public health preparedness for other school districts.

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