Local Health Officials Prepare for Possibility of New Coronavirus

Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH) convened a meeting of local officials and health-care providers recently to encourage monitoring for the novel coronavirus first reported in China.

The virus, known as 2019-nCoV, has caused thousands of respiratory infections and hundreds of deaths since last December. Travelers have also spread the virus to other places, including a handful of states. So far, no cases of the virus have been confirmed in the county or Montana.

“The risk of the virus here is low at this point,” said Eric Merchant, administrator of disease control and prevention at LCPH. “But we consider any new infectious disease to be a serious concern, and we owe it to our community to be watchful and prepared to deal with it.”

The meeting was attended by about two dozen representatives of LCPH, St. Peter’s Health, PureView Health Center, Helena Regional Airport, the City of Helena, and local schools.

Jamie Seymour, infection preventionist and RN with St. Peter’s Health, appreciated the chance to collaborate with others about the issue.

“The situation with 2019-nCoV is evolving,” she said, “and the information available to medical professionals is frequently updated. In situations like this, it’s important to be proactive and work alongside community partners so we can have a coordinated, planned response in the event that we do see 2019-nCoV in our community.”

Merchant updated participants on symptoms and spread of the virus and noted that there have been far more infections and deaths from flu in the United States this season than coronavirus worldwide. He urged attendees to contact LCPH immediately if they see a person who has fever and respiratory symptoms and has either had close contact with someone known to have the virus or has traveled to China within two weeks of the start of symptoms.

LCPH gets frequent updates on the coronavirus outbreak from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. It routinely shares this information with local medical providers and others.
“We intend to be as transparent as possible about any local risks associated with this outbreak,” Merchant said. “Right now, we’re focused on giving the public the information they need to make sound decisions about their own health. And right now, that means avoiding travel to China.”

He said everyday precautions can help prevent the spread of flu and other germs, including coronavirus:

- Avoid contact with sick people;
- Stay home if you’re sick;
- Cover your coughs and sneezes;
- Wash your hands often with soap and water;
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth; and
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated.


The CDC may issue additional travel warnings depending on the spread of the virus. Those will be available at wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/ or by calling LCPH at 457-8900.