



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Prep For Ebola AND The Flu

JAMES L. SEWARD    October 24, 2014

News stories focused on Ebola have been constant over the past few weeks and months, and for good reason. Now that the virus has come to New York it is crucial that we take steps to contain the virus and ensure that strong protocols are in place to treat any infected individuals. Several training events and other forums have been held in recent weeks to ready our health care workers, including a Senate Health Committee roundtable with health and security officials from the public and private sectors taking part in the discussion.

The roundtable discussion brought together the state's hospitals, public health and emergency preparedness officials, and health care experts to talk about current efforts and protocols for when a suspected Ebola patient is identified. Issues discussed included patient placement, isolation, transportation, staff allocation, protective equipment, laboratory requirements and other necessary precautions, and highlighted areas where improvements may be needed.

While New York is a leader in emergency preparedness efforts and has one of the most highly-regarded health care systems in the world, the state is also home to one of the most active international airports at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK). The senate roundtable and other events and steps initiated by the governor have readied our state and we are seeing these measures in full effect now in New York City. To go a step further, a travel ban on passengers from the West African nations where Ebola is prevalent would also

make sense and I encourage President Obama to enact such restrictions.

The New York State Department of Health website has a comprehensive section on Ebola which can be found at <http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/ebola>. The website includes up to date information with special sections for the public, hospitals, EMS workers, and health care providers. The website also answers many of the “frequently asked questions” you may have about the virus.

One other important fact that has been brought to light in discussing Ebola – some Ebola symptoms are nearly identical to the early signs of the flu. There is a fear that many people will rush to the doctor mistakenly thinking they have been infected by Ebola when in fact they have contracted the flu - just another reason to make sure you receive your flu vaccination.

While Ebola is grabbing the headlines, it is important to keep in mind that influenza is an extremely serious and deadly virus. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), each year in the United States, on average, five percent to twenty percent of the population gets the flu and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications. Over a period of 30 years, between 1976 and 2006, estimates of flu-associated deaths in the United States range from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people.

There are several steps you can take to help protect yourself and your family from the flu, including:

- Washing your hands often with soap and warm water. Alcohol-based hand cleansers are also effective;
- Avoiding people who are ill;

- Staying home from work or school if you are sick;
- Using tissue when you cough, sneeze or spit, and dispose of the tissue properly;
- Keeping hands away from your face;
- Cleaning shared space more often such as phone receivers, keyboards, steering wheels and office equipment.

Along with the preventive measures, medical professionals also say that vaccination is the best protection against contracting the flu. CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine for everyone six months of age and older as the first and most important step in protecting against this serious disease. While there are many different flu viruses, the seasonal flu vaccine is designed to protect against the main flu viruses that research suggests will cause the most illness during the upcoming flu season.

While it is important that government ensures our emergency system is prepared for Ebola, it is equally vital that everyone take steps to help battle the flu virus.

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