Oregon scores high on national public health preparedness assessment

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A new assessment of the nation's ability to respond to a public health emergency ranks Oregon as having achieved 9 out of 10 key preparedness indicators. Oregon was one of 22 states to score nine or above, higher than all other Western states. Since 2003 the Trust for America's Health (TFAH) has issued its "Ready or Not? Protecting the Public's Health from Diseases, Disasters, and Bioterrorism" report that examines the country's readiness to respond to health threats and areas of vulnerability. "The report shows that investments in preparedness have brought improvements across the country, and this is certainly the case for Oregon," said Grant Higginson, M.D., community health and health planning administrator in the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division. "However, it's critical that government funding in this area be maintained or the gains we've made will go away." Unfortunately, the Bush administration's FY 2008 budget contains a $146 million cut in public health preparedness funding, which represents a 25 percent reduction from FY 2005, according to the report. Higginson pointed to public health's response to recent disastrous windstorms and flooding as an example of where the investment paid off. "We were able to mount a coordinated effort that brought rapid assistance to counties in need," he said. "This was due to improved planning capability and a stronger public health infrastructure, both made possible through federal preparedness funds." "While improvements in preparedness have been made, work still remains," Higginson cautioned. "One area of concern is liability protection for health care personnel who respond to a public health emergency. Because comprehensive safeguards are not in place, there could be a real problem in recruiting health care workers during a major disaster." The report measures states' progress in these areas: Â· Mass Distribution -- Strategic National Stockpile: Is there an adequate state plan for distributing emergency vaccines, antidotes and medical supplies from the Strategic National Stockpile? Â· Mass Distribution -- Antiviral Stockpiling: Did the state purchase part of its share of federal antiviral drugs for use during an influenza pandemic? Â· Public Health Laboratories -- Bio-threat testing: Does the state laboratory have sufficient capabilities to test for biological threats? Â· Public Health Laboratories -- Workforce Surge: Is the state public health laboratory able to provide 24/7 coverage to analyze samples? Â· Biosurveillance: Does the state use a disease surveillance system compatible with the Centers for Disease national system, including integrating data from multiple sources, electronic lab reporting, and an Internet browser? Â· Healthcare Volunteer Liability Protection: Are there state laws that reduce or limit liability exposure for health care volunteers during a public health emergency? Â· Emergency Preparedness Drills: Is the state National Guard engaged in public health emergency preparedness drills or training exercises? Â· Community Resiliency: Does the state meet the minimum threshold of 14 Medical Reserve Corps volunteers per 100,000 persons? Â· Public Health Progress -- Senior's Seasonal Flu Vaccination: Did the state increase its seasonal flu immunization rates for adults age 65 and older? Â· Funding Commitment: Did the state maintain or increase funding for public health programs for FY 2005-2006 to FY 2006-2007? In terms of its score, Oregon is three weeks away from achieving all 10 indicators, Higginson added. The state public health laboratory was unable to meet a measure which required the ability to handle potentially lethal infectious agents. That will change in January, when the lab moves into a new facility that provides level 3 bio-safety capability. Trust for America's Health is a non-profit, non-partial organization supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Data for the indicators were gathered from a variety of publicly available sources or from public officials in 2007. The complete report is on the TFAH Web site at http://healthyamericans.org/.