

Archdiocese wants parishes ready for swine flu

As the Center for Disease Control estimates more than 40 percent of the country could contract H1N1 influenza without proper vaccination, the Archdiocese of Baltimore wants parishes to be prepared.

The government has already declared the H1N1 virus - known as swine flu - a pandemic, after there were more than 40,000 confirmed cases and 300 deaths in the United States by late July.

A meeting open to parish representatives will be held Sept. 4 at Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore, exploring how to handle emergencies. The one-day conference starting at 8:30 a.m. will teach how parishes can deal with staff shortages and decreased collections while addressing how to minister to the sick and to the families of people who will potentially die.

"We're not trying to push any panic buttons," said Anne Buening, the pastoral associate to Auxiliary Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski and the organizer of the event. "All we're trying to do is be prepared for this, and this will also help people prepare for other kinds of emergencies."

Experts in emergency preparedness, infection control, as well as theology and ministry to the sick and suffering, will steer the conversation of the day.

"We started hearing more and more discussion about the swine flu and its potential effect on all of us," Buening said. "We asked ourselves, 'what could we pull together to help parishes prepare for something like this?' "

The meeting is based on a similar project by Deborah Czawlytko, the parish nurse of St. Ignatius in Hickory. Czawlytko gave the presentation last year while completing ministry studies at St. Mary's Seminary and University's Ecumenical Institute of Theology.

"I think what I learned from that is that local parishes can play a tremendous role in

wide-scale disasters,” Czawlytko said. “If we had anything like the flu pandemic of 1918 it would be devastating. It’s better for parishes to prepare now. They need to be ready for what it might look like and how they can minister to people effectively.”

One-third of the world, 500 million out of 1.8 billion people at the time, were infected. Between 50 to 100 million died.

The archdiocese made some alterations to Masses earlier this year when the swine flu started to spread. For a brief time, people could only accept the Eucharist by hand and were encouraged to refrain from shaking hands during the sign of peace.

Buening said the archdiocese is reviewing how effective those actions were and is also studying how other archdioceses prepare for such emergencies. She said the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa has an impressive, 62-page document that Baltimore is reviewing.

Czawlytko said people should wash their hands regularly, cover their mouths while coughing and exhibit good hygiene. When a person is ill, she said, it’s best for them to stay home rather infecting others at Mass.

She said parishes should make use of parishioners who are medical professionals.

Good Samaritan said it has room for a little more than 70 people at the influenza meeting, which will be recorded and put on the archdiocese’s Web site, www.archbalt.org.

“The whole purpose is to try and raise awareness,” said Deborah Bena, Good Samaritan’s Community Outreach and Health Ministries Coordinator. “Until you’re facing it, you don’t always think about it. Hopefully this will help.”