

# PLAN FOR THE WORST

## HOPE FOR THE BEST by Vicky Cerino

**RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES,  
BE THEY LOCAL OR GLOBAL,  
REQUIRES INTENSE PLANNING,  
COMMUNICATION AND PRACTICE.**

**THERE IS NO TIME TO LOSE.**

Hurricane Katrina.

The Virginia Tech shootings.

Each crisis exposed the vulnerability of organizations, and underscored the importance of planning for the unexpected. A flexible plan can guide an organization through chaos and uncertainty so that it can continue to function and respond to the needs of its constituents.

For nearly two years, faculty, staff and students at UNMC, The Nebraska Medical Center and UNMC Physicians have been planning for one of the biggest anticipated public health threats ever: pandemic flu.

A pandemic flu would pose a monumental challenge to the world's health, economic and social infrastructure. Public health experts say millions of people worldwide could die. Officials estimate up to 1.9 million people could die in the United States alone.

In Nebraska, the death toll could reach 10,832. With a rapidly spreading disease, governmental and health care systems could

quickly become overwhelmed. Although the medical center has 689 licensed beds and a 10-bed biocontainment unit – the largest of three such units in the country – off-site facilities would be needed.

Leading the charge for pandemic flu preparedness are Don Leuenberger, UNMC vice chancellor for business and finance, and Cindy Owen, vice president of corporate affairs, The Nebraska Medical Center.

They have charged eight committees to plan and coordinate clinical staffing, communication, employee health, supply, triage, mental health, support staffing, facilities and security. All contingencies are anticipated.

“We’re focused on pandemic events under the supposition that if we can respond to those adequately, we also can respond to tornadoes, floods and other natural events,” Leuenberger said. “Our goal is to ensure that as a campus, we have done the necessary preparation so that we can sustain medical services, identify essential personnel and assemble security to make an effective response.”

The team also is focused on making faculty and staff members aware of how to personally plan for a pandemic, including stockpiling basic necessities.

The team is working with the governor's office, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Nebraska Health and Human Services System, the Center for Biopreparedness Education, Douglas County Health Department, the Omaha Metropolitan Medical Response System, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the military.

"Our mission and our expertise make us a focal point for any medical response in the community and in the state," Leuenberger said.

## DEVELOP A FAMILY PLAN

Download a check list to help prepare your family for any large-scale emergency from any of these Web sites:

[www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)

[www.hhss.ne.gov/pandemic](http://www.hhss.ne.gov/pandemic)

[www.unmc.edu/avianflu](http://www.unmc.edu/avianflu)



A myriad of issues are being addressed during planning meetings including identifying essential employees, determining which academic, clinical and hospital services to suspend, and dealing with issues of compensation, quarantine, labor pools, and alternative accommodations for patients if hospital beds are filled.

The hospital's planning efforts focus on preserving the life and safety of its staff members and students, Owen said, as well as sustaining its mission to provide health care for the community.

"Hospitals and health care professionals are part of the first responders that help keep our community safe in any natural

or manmade disaster," Owen said. "It's our responsibility to be prepared for such events even though we're hoping they never happen.

"We learned a lot of lessons from Katrina, which was on a regional scale. In planning for this, we're trying to imagine a catastrophe of the same magnitude across the country. The federal and state government expects hospitals, communities and individuals to be able to self-sustain for seven to 10 days at the beginning of a disaster," she said.

Along with the massive planning effort is education of employees and the public. The medical center so far has held 12 campus forums on the topic of pandemic flu. More education is planned.

Planning for such a large-scale disaster will serve the medical center and state well, regardless of the catastrophe.

"The question has always been 'when' a crisis will occur, not 'if,'" Leuenberger said. "Planning makes the difference in an organization's ability to respond effectively." ☺☺