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2009 CHDS Essay Contest Winner Visits Campus

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2009 CHDS Essay Contest Winner Visits Campus

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As a then master's degree student in public health, Valerie Yeager was participating in a practice exercise examining how various emergency and medical responders would handle a bus wreck involving passengers who may potentially have avian influenza.

She quickly realized public health practitioners would be occupied with their mission and tasks at a time when the public would crave, and need, important disease information.

Yeager envisioned a solution applicable to many in an emergency or disaster: Utilizing Poison Control Centers to disseminate public information and answer questions, freeing public health practitioners to set up mobile hospitals, conduct disease surveillance and a host of other priorities.

Yeager, a research assistant and doctoral student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), translated that idea into a winning entry in the CHDS' 2009 Homeland Security Essay Competition. She was on campus Sept. 11, meeting with faculty and students as well as presenting her paper to a fresh cohort of CHDS master's degree students.

Her public health background has familiarized Yeager with the tasks faced in her field when disaster strikes – from establishing mobile hospitals and morgues to preventing disease – at a time when reliable public information is critical.

"That makes it difficult to respond to individual calls (to public health agencies) whereas poison control does that 24 hours a day, and they do it very well," said Yeager, who has a master's degree in public health from UAB. "There is a natural partnership between poison control and public health."

Those kinds of partnerships are something the CHDS seeks to foster in the homeland security arena.

"This year's winning essay reflects the type of concepts of interagency collaboration and communication the Center seeks to inspire," CHDS Director Glen Woodbury said. "Ms. Yeager's well-articulated idea demonstrates the kind of imagination and innovation that is necessary to advance homeland security and public health objectives."

Yeager's paper sets forth how partnership between public health agencies and Poison Control Centers could benefit the public in several ways. One is in preventing a surge at medical care facilities by providing tailored information as Poison Control hotlines have the ability to individually answer calls from what could be a traumatized public.

During a mass outbreak of, say H1N1, for example, public health officials may ask people who believe they are ill to stay home. A hotline staffed by Poison Control could provide individualized information that may prevent the sick from venturing to a hospital and head off a surge to medical facilities, or by discovering callers who are severely ill enough to warrant more immediate medical attention and should go to a hospital.

Poison Control call centers in the United States averaged a collective 12,000 calls per day in 2007, according to Yeager's research. And often they are responding to public health questions already – Yeager said between May 20 and Aug. 12 Poison Control Centers handled 392 calls related to H1N1.



The question, she said, is whether these centers have the adequate capacity to handle a mass public health-related emergency.

Already, there are examples of cooperation between the two entities. The essay notes that the Georgia Poison Center has been working with the state's Department of Public Health for more than 10 years by taking after-hours calls for Public Health and providing direction for callers as needed, for example.

Public health agencies could assist with financial support and by ensuring the information that is dispersed is consistent and accurate she said.

In the bigger picture, Yeager said she hopes her essay fosters communications and encourages interagency and inter-governmental collaboration.

"The more we interact, the smaller the borders between us are," she said.

She plans to follow up her paper with a survey to examine the capacity Poison Control centers may have in taking on such a task.

Writing an essay on emergency communication and response originated as an assignment in a doctoral course taught by Lisa McCormick, program director of the South Central Center for Public Health Preparedness at UAB. Yeager said she was already seeking a way to have her idea published and the essay contest provided a fitting outlet. (UAB graduate student Jesse Tucker was a finalist in the inaugural CHDS essay competition in 2007.)

McCormick said the essay contest is an avenue for her students to contribute real-world ideas to the homeland security discipline.

"This essay allows public health students interested in disaster preparedness and emergency management to think creatively and critically about real issues identified by CHDS and to contribute to the dialogue," McCormick said.

"Public health is a multidisciplinary endeavor. This essay assignment allows students the chance to explore a specific topic of their interest from their disciplinary prospective in the context of homeland security."

A string of events in recent years has shown the valuable role public health needs to play in homeland security, McCormick added, pointing to examples such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2005 and the SARS outbreak of 2003 and 2004.

"These events necessitate that public health become increasingly involved in preparedness activities in order to reduce vulnerabilities and educate our communities to the risk, to increase response capacity and capabilities, and to strengthen the entire public health system which has many partners outside of governmental public health," McCormick said.

For Yeager, the thesis topic is about collaboration and efficiency during public health emergencies and disasters.

"I want us to explore ways we can reduce redundancy, ways that we can leverage existing infrastructures, and ways to work together with other agencies that do what they do really well, and help us do what we do really well," she said.

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