

Health Capsules

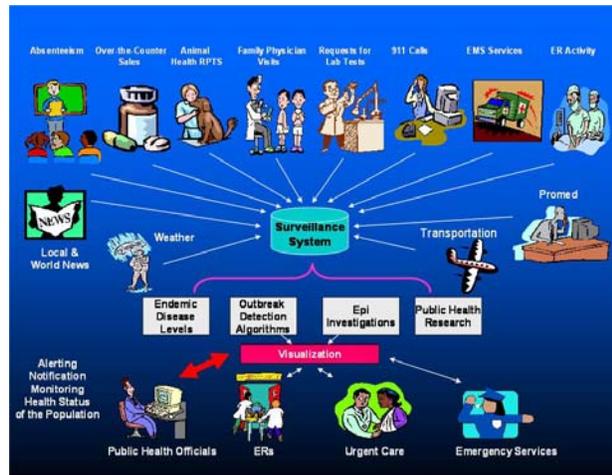
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

Regional Bio-Surveillance System Goes Live

The reward of two years of hard work and challenges came to fruition at the recent kick-off event and launch of the region's unified syndromic surveillance system. This system, also known as ESSENCE IV (Early Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-Based Epidemics) NCR Network, has been employed to detect outbreaks or widespread health events that may occur anywhere in the National Capital Region. Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia currently participate in a hospital emergency department (ED) surveillance program. The ESSENCE II NCR System, developed by the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Lab (JHU/APL), will enhance existing surveillance systems by incorporating civilian data traditional (i.e. emergency department data) and non-traditional data sources (i.e. school absenteeism, over-the-counter sales and animal health reports) and the processing algorithms. Because diseases are not jurisdictionally specific, the NCR ESSENCE II System will enable early identification of disease outbreaks, whether naturally occurring or resulting from bioterrorism, by pooling from participating hospitals and health departments across the region. A possible disease outbreak would be indicated by a spike in the daily or weekly data of related symptoms, visits to physicians, or lab tests.

The April 22nd kick-off event brought together senior health and homeland security leaders from Maryland, Virginia, the District of Columbia, and federal partners at the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services to celebrate the accomplishments of regional health officials and their partners have worked for over two years to lay the ground work and conduct pilot programs that lead to the creation of this electronic detection system. A Steering Committee was established to work through many of the details involved with establishing and implementing this electronic surveillance system. Their work will include developing clinical practice guidelines and notification methods, and reviewing data sharing agreements. They will work closely with the JHU/APL team on many technical aspects of the system.

The ESSENCE II NCR system will not replace traditional surveillance mechanisms that are currently in place in hospitals and health care facilities throughout the Washington Area as these methods are required by state laws and continue to provide valuable public health information. Because regional collaboration and connectivity are essential to success, Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia have worked together intensively to ensure that this system works seamlessly with current surveillance operations.



The regional bio-surveillance system will use non-traditional indicators as well as traditional data sources to detect outbreaks.

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Special points of interest:

- COG's 2003 Annual Report is available online! Check out www.mwcog.org for a copy.
- Thinking about adoption? Be sure to watch "Wednesday's Child" on Wednesday at 5:00p.m. and Sundays at 9:00 a.m. on NBC4 or call 1-88-TO ADOPT ME (1-888-623-6786).
- Want to know who's who in area local governments? Then obtain COG's 2004 Regional Directory. Contact COG's Information Center at (202) 962-3256.



The availability of dippers have contributed to increased PCP-related admissions in suburban Maryland.

DEWS Report Cites Increase in PCP Use

PCP-related admissions reached a five-year high among Prince George's County residents last year, according to a report by the Drug Early Warning System (DEWS) of the University of Maryland's Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR). PCP treatment admissions also increased in Montgomery County, across the state of Maryland, and among Washington, D.C. residents admitted into treatment facilities in Maryland.

DEWS researchers interviewed juvenile offenders and key informants and found that a new form of PCP, "dippers", has become more popular and widely available. Dippers are joints or cigarettes that are dipped in liquid PCP or embalming fluid. PCP-related arrests

and emergency department visits have increased since 2001.

DEWS released the following recommendations as a result of this investigation:

1. Laboratory testing should be undertaken on suspected PCP drug seizures
2. An education campaign should be undertaken to increase public awareness
3. Close monitoring of PCP in this region is warranted.

For more information, please visit www.dewsonline.org or contact Erin Artigiani at erin@cesar.umd.edu.

Communities Rally to Eliminate Gang Activity

With the recent upswing in gang-related violence, leaders of localities are working to curb gang activity such as auto theft, property crimes, homicides, assaults, and drug trafficking. The District of Columbia, Montgomery County, and Prince Georges County are seeing a dramatic increase in Latino, Asian and Jamaican gangs. The most dangerous gang in the region is Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) which is the largest and fastest growing.

MS-13 as well as other local gangs are stepping up their recruitment efforts in order to increase their influence. Many gangs recruit youth from middle and high schools. Anecdotal accounts indicate that recruitment is taking place in some elementary schools.

Area officials are working feverishly to address growing community concerns about gang violence. Northern Virginia recently received federal funds (\$500,000) to step up its anti-gang efforts. Many police forces have expanded their gang units; and local elected officials have instituted gang prevention task forces. The District of Columbia's Gang Intervention Partnership is working to reduce gang violence in tar-

geted communities using law enforcement, intervention, and prevention strategies. Prince George's and Montgomery County Executives (Jack Johnson and Douglas Duncan have established the Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force this February.)

The Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force is holding a series of town hall meetings to hear comments, feedback, and the experiences of the public. At the May 26th forum, Police Chief Melvin High indicated "Prince George's County police are actively involved in suppression of gang activities." Chief High along with task force leaders were on hand to speak with parents and community leaders about what could be done locally to curb gang violence. Kathy Porter, Mayor of Takoma Park, told meeting attendees "The good news is that elected leaders recognize this problem and have committed themselves to doing something about it." The Joint County Task force will submit a report with recommendations to County Executives in September. The task force can be contacted at gangtaskforce@montgomerycountymd.gov or 240-777-2521.



Police departments, community leaders and elected officials are working to eliminate gang-related activity which has been on the rise in recent months.

WRAP Survey Paints Scary Picture of Underage Drinking

The Washington Regional Alcohol Program (WRAP) has recently released the results of its 2003 Youth Survey. Interviews were conducted by Andres McKenna Research among 400 Washington area 15 and 16 year olds about their experiences with alcohol.

Key findings include:

- 40% of respondents have used alcohol;
- 20% of 15 and 16 year olds have been drunk, half of them within the last month;
- Of those who had ever been drunk, one in 10 reported that they have been drunk more than 3 times in the last year;
- One-third of respondents report taking

alcohol from their parents or friends' parents; half report that they were given alcohol by brothers, sisters or parents;

- Reported reasons for drinking among 15 and 16 year olds include: conformity (41%), boredom (27%); rebellion (11%); and glamour (11%).

The results of this survey are used to educate elected officials about ways to reduce underage drinking and assist WRAP in creating effective alcohol awareness programs for high school students. For more information on WRAP and its programs, please visit www.wrap.org.



According to the survey, when asked why they or their peers drink, conformity was the most offered reason.

Strengthening Families Project Comes to a Close



COG has recently released a report summarizing the outcomes of a five-year research initiative that tested the effectiveness of the Strengthening Families Program (SFP). The Strengthening Washington, D.C. Area Families Project was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) of the

National Institutes of Health and conducted by COG, the University of Utah and the University of Maryland. The SFP project provided family skills training to more than 700 at-risk Washington, D.C. area families and tested the

program's effectiveness and impact on African-American and white families respectively. This initiative was completed in February 2003.

These findings are available for dissemination to program and policy leaders across the region in order to advance science-based prevention policy and programming throughout the Washington metropolitan area. The knowledge gained from this project will continue to inform the region about family skills programs and will change how prevention is practiced in the National Capital Region. To obtain a hardcopy, contact 202-962-3275. You may view the report online at www.mwcog.org.

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The establishment of this system is a phenomenal victory in that regional health officials and their partners worked diligently to address many issues of coordination and management such as legal ramifications and patient confidentiality. It is the hope of the health officials and their homeland security and hospital part-

ners that the ESSENCE II system will separate hoaxes and natural occurrences from actual attacks; alleviate suffering and reduce health consequences by enabling a rapid intervention; and minimize the spread of an infectious agent to the entire population.



After two years of planning and development, the regional electronic syndromic surveillance system became operational in May 2004.



Reports and Resources of Interest

- Frederick County Emergency Planning Brochure — <http://www.frederickhealth.org/pdf/EmerPlanBro1.pdf>
- The Alcohol Cost Calculator for Kids — <http://www.alcoholcostcalculator.org/kids/index.html>
- Montgomery County Health & Human Services: A Guide for the Community — <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/hhs/reports/communityguidebook6-12.pdf>
- Northern Virginia Regional Commission — <http://www.novaregion.org/qgonline.htm>
- Lead in Water Information for the Region — <http://www.mwcog.org/environment/water/watersupply/lead/>
- District of Columbia Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy — <http://www.teenpregnancydc.org/>
- StargazerNET ReadyLinks Program — <http://www.stargazernet.net/ReadyLinks>
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Small Step Initiative — <http://www.smallstep.gov/>
- A Town Hall on Eliminating Ethnic and Racial Health Disparities by Moving the Nation from Statistics to Solutions — http://www.kaisernetwork.org/health_cast/hcast_index.cfm?display=detail&hc=1113
- Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force: *Gang-Parents' Guide* — http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgtmpl.asp?url=/Content/EXEC/GangTF/gangs_parents_guide.asp
- Kids County 2004 Data Book— <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/databook/>
- 2004 Minority Women's Health Summit "Women of Color, Taking Action for a Healthier Life: Progress, Partnerships and Possibilities" (August 12-15, 2004) — <http://www.4woman.gov/mwhs/>
- The Health Information Technology Summit (October 2004) - <http://www.hitsummit.com/>
- 15th Annual Recovery Month / September 2004 — <http://www.recoverymonth.gov/>
- 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System— <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm>

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments is the association of 19 local governments working together for a better metropolitan region. COG provides a focus for action and develops sound regional responses to such issues as the environment, affordable housing, economic development, health and family concerns, human services, population growth, public safety and transportation.

To subscribe to *Health Capsules* or to share information on regional health issues, please contact Sandra Adomako-Bempong at 202-962-3275 or sabempong@mwcog.org.



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