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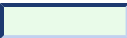
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Article: **Preparing for the unknown: In a post-Sept. 11, Katrina world, Columbus hosts first summit aimed at helping cities respond**
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Jun. 30--It's a stomach-churning scenario.

A Synovus employee and a Fort Benning officer arrive in Atlanta on a flight from Tokyo. Within a day both become ill, developing fevers.

They enter a hospital, with the Synovus employee soon placed on a respirator. Her child at school starts running a fever.

The following day, Columbus hospitals report a sharp spike in people suffering flu-like symptoms. Similar reports surface around the Southeast.

Just as CNN is reporting a case of human-to-human avian flu in China, the Synovus employee dies. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends an immediate citywide quarantine to keep the pandemic from swirling out of control and causing massive casualties.

Such a dramatic episode was included in a one-inch packet given to 150 participants Friday at the Meta-Leadership Summit for Preparedness in Columbus.

It's the first of what government officials and academic scholars hope will become a national series of conferences aimed at helping communities prepare for and cope with a public health and safety crisis.

"This is absolutely critical to the safety of our communities," said Dr. Richard Besser, director of the CDC's Coordinating Office for Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response.

"Hopefully, we'll never experience a terrorist attack," he said. "But I can guarantee you we'll experience environmental threats and new infectious disease threats that will challenge our communities. And by being prepared for anything makes us more resilient and our communities much stronger to face any challenge that comes our way."

Banking firm Synovus Financial Corp., the city of Columbus and the Bradley-Turner Foundation hosted the summit at the Columbus Convention & Trade Center. It brought together a diverse audience of business, government and non-profit leaders, including law enforcement, emergency responders and the military.

Columbus was chosen for the initial gathering because of its strong corporate and philanthropic sponsorship, Besser said. The next summit will take place in Kansas City this September and another in New Jersey before the effort goes national over the next two to three years.

A key focus of the initiative is to break down barriers between leaders in the community, be they a mayor, hospital administrator or a corporate CEO.

Richard Anthony, chairman and CEO of Synovus, was among those on hand. His

\$32 billion banking company sprawls across five Southeastern states, with a growing presence along storm-prone coastal areas in Florida and Alabama.

Disaster response following the bloody terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, as well as the devastating damage along the Gulf Coast during Hurricane Katrina nearly two years ago, were examples discussed Friday.

"One of the key things that we've learned from some of the storms that we've had to deal with, is that the basics have to come first -- the gasoline, the generators, the ice, the water," Anthony said. "How can people sustain themselves and get by?"

The financial company, naturally, is also keen on developing and improving backup disaster recovery sites that store

data on clients' cards and accounts.

"You have to spend money to have this backup capability, but Katrina brought that home with the banks down in that region," said Anthony, noting his company is now spending \$20 million on a data center in Columbus.

Cooperation is key

The summit's faculty stressed familiarity and cooperation between the host of government agencies, businesses and non-profit organizations that could be called upon in the event of a natural disaster, terrorist attack or other crises.

At a news conference in the trade center, Mayor Jim Wetherington said the city has a capable Homeland Security office in the area and they do a good job.

At the same time, he said, he expected the conference to help the region to better prepare for disasters.

"I think this summit is going to cause us to be more aware of one another, more aware of the private sector, more aware of all the components that make up this community," Wetherington said.

Police Chief Ricky Boren said Columbus, as any government, can always improve the synergy between its agencies such as police, fire department and sheriff's office, but that it has a good foundation and good operating procedures in place.

One advantage Columbus has in this area is its consolidated city and county government, which eliminates inefficiencies created by jurisdictions, Boren said.

And Columbus' ability to respond quickly and effectively to disaster also is improved by personal relationships between people who work in the police department, fire department and other entities involved in preparing for emergencies, said Riley Land, Columbus' deputy director of emergency management.

"You can go to a restaurant in town and see a guy sitting in a tan shirt, a guy sitting in blue shirt and a guy sitting in a white shirt, sitting there having lunch together. That's 80 percent of our success," Land said.

Boundaries mean nothing

In the event of a disaster in Columbus or the surrounding areas, people from all over the area need to act as well, said Charlie Stokes, president and CEO of the CDC Foundation.

State lines -- boundaries set by the government -- don't mean much in disaster scenarios, particularly in cases of pandemics, he said.

"Diseases know no boundaries," he said.

Stokes also said establishing relationships between leaders in Columbus, Phenix City and Russell County is important.

"The response comes down to the individuals in charge and meta-leaders," he said. "We need to work across the river and do our best to solve problems collectively."

Chance Corbett, Homeland Security Emergency Management Agency director for Russell County, said the county's government organizations, businesses and nonprofits are "very prepared" and that they work well with Columbus organizations.

"I feel we have a great working relationship now," he said.

Corbett said they try to plan for disasters, coordinate schools and businesses, and utilize the Columbus market to communicate with people on both sides of the river.

For example, during weather-related disasters -- the most common crisis to strike Russell County, Corbett said -- the EMA uses local news organizations and radio stations in both Columbus and Russell County to communicate with residents. The two also share a bomb squad.

Pointing out that many leaders from both Columbus and Phenix City were at the conference, Corbett said, the communities cooperate on many things already.

"We share the community," Corbett said. "The leadership is already there."

One-stop service

More than once, examples of Columbus' collaborative spirit were cited. The most impressive was the relief One-Stop Service Center that grew out of a need to more efficiently serve the Hurricane Katrina evacuees that made their way here.

Meta-Leadership trainers Barry C. Dorn and Leonard J. Marcus said on their initial visit to Columbus, they heard stories about the service center, for which St. Luke United Methodist Church donated use of the building at 1043 Third Ave.

The service center was set up by local governments and the Red Cross. And agencies such as Goodwill, Open Door Community House and Second Harvest Food Bank pitched in with clothing, food and other necessities.

The Red Cross also coordinated local therapists and provided on-site counseling and referrals to evacuees. Also present were representatives from the Department of Family and Children Services, Open Door Community House and Second Harvest Food Bank, which provided supplies and goods to evacuees.

An estimated 2,000 people displaced by the storm came to the Columbus-Phenix City area, and at the service center

the collaboration of business, government and nonprofit leaders helped them more easily navigate through a number of systems by having them in one location.

Staff writers Sara Pauff, Brian McDearmon and Kaffie Sledge contributed to this report.

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