

U.S. health system unprepared, report says
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WASHINGTON -- The nation's public health system -- the first line of defense against pandemic flu, a bioterror attack or other widespread health emergency -- remains woefully unprepared to protect the American public, according to a report out Tuesday.

The annual study by Trust for America's Health found that emergency health preparedness remains inadequate five years after the 9/11 and anthrax attacks of 2001 raised fears of bioterrorism. The study also comes one year after Hurricane Katrina highlighted the need for the government to provide health care quickly when thousands of people are in need.

"The nation is nowhere near as prepared as we should be for bioterrorism, bird flu and other health disasters," said Jeff Levi, director of the trust. "We continue to make progress each year, but it is limited. As a whole, Americans face unnecessary and unacceptable levels of risk."

The report ranked the 50 states and Washington, D.C., on a 10- point system that assessed key indicators, such as whether each state is capable of distributing drugs and antidotes from a national stockpile, whether there are enough hospital beds and nurses to handle a patient surge, and whether states have enough labs and scientists to test for biological threats and other outbreaks.

Oklahoma came out on top -- the only state that satisfied all 10 measures. California, Iowa, Maryland and New Jersey scored lowest with four points out of 10.

The report also found that:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has determined that only 15 states have been certified as capable of distributing drugs and antidotes from the stockpile.
- Half the states would run out of available hospital beds within two weeks of a moderate pandemic flu outbreak.
- Forty states face a nursing shortage.
- Rates for vaccinating the elderly for the flu decreased in 13 states over last year.
- Four states don't test for the flu year-round, something health officials regard as key to monitoring for a pandemic.
- Eleven states and Washington, D.C., aren't well-equipped to test for biological threats.

Although Congress appropriated \$5 billion this year for officials to prepare for a possible pandemic, progress has been too slow, the report said.

"The public believes that more is being done and that we are better prepared than we are," said trust board member Margaret Hamburg, a former New York City health officer and former top official at the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Allowing public health system weaknesses "to persist can lead to serious consequences," she says. "Our systems need to be strengthened."

CDC spokesman Von Roebuck agreed. After decades of neglect, the public health system has improved tremendously since 9/11, he said. But "more needs to be done."