

October 28, 2014

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

John Martins, Director
Employee and Public Communications
(207) 287-5012

NEWS RELEASE
Commissioner Discusses
Ebola Protocols

AUGUSTA – Maine Department of Health and Human Services Commissioner Mary Mayhew met with members of the media on Tuesday to provide an update on Maine's protocols.

Here are the Commissioner's remarks:

Good evening.

I am Mary Mayhew, Commissioner of the Maine Health Department of Health and Human Services. I'm here today to give you an update on Maine's response to the Ebola crisis, particularly as it relates to travelers and healthcare workers returning to Maine from West Africa.

Before I begin, I want to be very clear about our focus.

Every step that we are taking to prepare and plan for our response to Ebola is to protect the health of Maine people. There is no more critical function for government than to do everything possible to ensure the safety of its citizens – and we are focused on that at every point.

As you know, this terrible disease is widespread in the West African countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. As part of the worldwide response to the outbreak, there are health workers from our country that are doing brave work by traveling to the afflicted countries to assist in battling the outbreak.

These are important efforts and we commend those individuals who are assisting in this way. That good work also comes with very real risk. Recognizing the risk, the federal government has moved to establish screening protocols for those individuals returning to the United States from one of these countries.

However, we know this screening has limits in the effectiveness it provides. We know that a health worker in New York, who had no known breach in his protective equipment, unfortunately later developed symptoms and tested positive for this terrible disease. To ensure we are doing all we can to protect the health of Maine people, The Maine Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Disease Control and Prevention continues daily post-arrival monitoring of travelers who came to Maine from an affected country.

Any traveler from West Africa who comes to Maine will be monitored for at least 21 days after the last possible exposure to Ebola. This is consistent with federal guidelines.

This monitoring includes daily check-ins with a state epidemiologist for any signs of a fever or other Ebola related symptoms. If any symptoms develop, they will receive immediate medical care.

We have instituted additional protocols for ensuring that those individuals with a higher level of risk do not unnecessarily make contact with the public. These protocols include voluntary, in-home quarantine for someone who was known to have had direct contact with an Ebola patient.

I want to be sure everyone understands what quarantine means in this case. Stating it plainly, what we are asking for is that individuals who had direct contact with Ebola patients stay in their home and avoid public contact until the 21 days for potential incubation has passed.

We acknowledge that this protocol may go slightly beyond the federal guidelines, although the recent changes are very much more in line with Maine's approach. We have made the determination that out of an abundance of caution, this is a reasonable, common-sense approach to remove additional risk and guard against a public health crisis in Maine.

If an individual who came in direct contact with Ebola patients has returned to Maine and is not willing to avoid public contact and stay in their home voluntarily during the period they are at some risk, we will take additional measures and pursue appropriate authority to ensure they make no public contact.

Our true desire is for a voluntary separation from the public. We do not want to have to legally enforce an in-home quarantine. We are confident that the selfless health workers, who were brave enough to care for Ebola patients in a foreign country, will be willing to take reasonable steps to protect the residents of their own country. However, we are willing to pursue legal authority if necessary to ensure risk is minimized for Mainers.

For any individual who must stay at home for a period of time for this reason, we will do all that we can to make sure that the person has everything necessary to be comfortable and receive the care that is needed.

I want to state again that we recognize the significant and brave contributions that are being made by healthcare workers each day, as they travel to West Africa and other regions of the world to provide critical care to those affected by disease. We are proud of our healthcare providers that continue to answer the call and are always ready to help others.

In closing, I encourage you and members of the public to visit the Maine CDC's website at www.maine.gov/ebola.

This website will be updated regularly with new guidance, updated protocols if warranted and easy-to-understand fact sheets.

Thank you