

City takes steps to fight bird flu
Firms also preparing for possible pandemic

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When it comes to bird flu, Gilbert officials and businesses have a rare chance.

"We have a kind of unique opportunity to prepare for a pandemic before it actually happens," said Gunnar Kuepper, the chief of operations for Emergency and Disaster Management Inc. of Los Angeles.

Kuepper delivered a presentation about bird flu to a group of about 65 emergency services, business, community and government leaders from Arizona and California on Tuesday in Gilbert.

Whether it's bird flu or something else, Kuepper said, local officials will some day be contending with a pandemic.

"Sooner or later, a new microorganism will come and tell us who's in charge here," he said.

Dave Crozier, Gilbert's vice mayor, attended the event Tuesday. He said the town is taking advantage of the opportunity to get in front of the potential pandemic.

"It's crucial that we be prepared, and I think Gilbert's done a good job of being prepared so far," he said. "It's going to come to fruition eventually - I think it's a matter of when, not if."

Collin DeWitt, the town's fire chief, said Gilbert has been studying the issue for about a year, and said Kuepper's presentation confirmed assumptions that the town had. Gilbert plans include a public education campaign about hygiene and immunizing all town personnel and their dependents against the common yearly flu but not bird flu, which has no vaccine yet. The town has the supplies it needs, including masks, gloves and personal protective equipment for staff, he said.

Bird flu is not yet transmittable between humans. However, it has become more aggressive over time and has become lethal for birds.

Through June 6, bird flu has infected 228 people worldwide and killed 130 of them, Kuepper said.

Most cases among humans have been linked to contact with infected birds, but experts fear that the virus could mutate into a form that makes it more easily transmittable among humans. To date, the bird flu virus has been detected in more than a dozen countries across Europe, mostly in wild birds.

"There really is no continuity in it," said Beverly Deason, Intel's Arizona emergency programs manager. Deason said Intel has a corporate plan for responding to the potential pandemic that is tied to the World Health Organization's model. Intel's plan includes stocking needed supplies like masks and doing needed training now.

"We aren't waiting until it hits, we're putting things in place so that when it does hit, we're ready for it," she said.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.