Health Care Community United to Combat Zika Virus

By J. Thomas Ryan, M.D., and Morris D. Reece

Sixty-nine.
As of mid-August, that was the number of reported Zika virus disease cases in the Commonwealth of Virginia. While none of those are domestic transmissions, the number has steadily climbed in the time since Virginia began tracking infections.

Nationally, the numbers are also concerning. As of mid-August, two American deaths reportedly have been attributed to Zika. Sixteen infants have been born with birth defects. And figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate more than 2,500 Zika virus cases have been reported in the United States, and nearly 600 pregnant women have lab evidence of Zika virus infection. The Zika virus is a disease primarily spread through the bite of infected mosquitos. It can also be transmitted sexually through intercourse, and from mother to baby during pregnancy. The illness is relatively mild for many adults, and not all those infected will exhibit symptoms. Zika virus infection for pregnant women, however, can cause microcephaly and other serious birth defects in babies.

This is a serious public health situation that has prompted engaged responses from government leaders and health care officials. And at every step along the way, hospitals have been part of the response effort.

In Virginia, Governor Terry McAuliffe established the Virginia Zika Task Force earlier this year to facilitate a rapid, effective response to the potential infiltration of the Zika virus in Virginia. Beginning in July, the state Department of General Services’ Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services (DCLS) commenced testing mosquitos in targeted areas across Virginia for Zika virus. So far, none of the mosquitos have tested positive for Zika.

Through the Task Force effort, VHHA, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), and Virginia’s hospitals and health care organizations are collaborating to ensure the health care system promotes prevention, and is prepared to respond to potential Zika infection cases, or even local transmissions in Virginia. As of mid-August, Florida was the only state with any locally acquired cases (29). Knowing the dangers that exist requires health care providers to plan ahead.

For more than a decade, VHHA and VDH have worked together under the Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP), a regionally structured collaborative effort among hospitals and state officials that exists to coordinate care to emerging health threats. That structure has been in place through a range of public health concerns, including Ebola and Zika.

Two recent examples of the engagement between public health officials and hospitals was a joint news conference this July in Richmond held by VHHA and VDH to highlight prevention steps to combat the spread of the Zika virus, and the continuing collaboration between hospitals, health systems, and public health agencies to plan and prepare for a wide range of public health challenges. The news conference was well-attended and attracted statewide media coverage. VHHA also streamed the event live on Facebook, attracting hundreds of viewers.

Then in August, on the heels of the joint news conference, VHHA’s Virginia Hospital Research & Education Foundation (VHREF) and VDH partnered on an informative Zika webinar for health care providers. The successful Aug. 3 broadcast attracted an audience of more than 140 participants. During the webinar VDH State Epidemiologist Dr. Laurie Forlano discussed the characteristics, diagnostics, challenges, and preventive steps regarding Zika. She highlighted the main
differences between other mosquito-borne illnesses and Zika virus, and shared a list of resources VDH provides to hospitals and health systems. And VHHA Technical Advisor and Hospital Preparedness Coordinator Morris D. Reece reviewed emergency preparedness protocols for the community and health systems. Reece noted that a lack of funding could potentially be a stumbling block in the fight against Zika. A recording of the webinar is available online for viewing on VHHA’s YouTube channel here. Readiness and preparation is a critical component of the strategic approach Virginia’s community hospitals and health systems take to safeguard public health. Hospitals are on standby 24/7/365 to respond to patient needs. Hospitals commit resources in the event of an emergent community health risk, even if the need doesn’t arise. While Zika is far less virulent than Ebola, the infrastructure and investments made by Virginia’s hospitals to combat other viral conditions remain in place to address the current situation.

That includes screening tools that have been developed to assist providers in identifying and managing patients, and existing communication channels that are in place to promote the sharing of vital information among the health care community and stakeholders. Virginia’s hospitals are prepared to provide treatment to people who may be infected by this virus, whether they go to a hospital initially, or arrive through referrals from primary care physicians who may serve as a treatment entry point for some patients. This includes a readiness to care for children potentially born with birth defects as a result of maternal Zika infection. And as needed, hospitals evaluate and update their infection control and waste management protocols, and conduct readiness exercises.

Since 2002, VHHA and VDH have been partners through the HPP. VHHA works with its member hospitals through the HPP regional structure. In each of the state’s six regions, that structure includes a Regional Hospital Coordinating Center designed to act as a hub in the event of a public health emergency. Preparedness planning, drills, and budget development all take place through this regional structure. Health care emergency planning is a continuous process with a focus on improving the health care system’s capacity to respond to a wide range of hazards that impact public health, including infectious diseases, severe weather, and man-made catastrophes. Through HPP, hospital-based and regional supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) have been acquired, and hospital workers across the state have been trained.
on how to properly use this equipment. In addition, there are various mobile medical assets which can be deployed to provide expanded treatment capacity as needed. And every hospital has plans in place to care for patients with infectious diseases.

The regional model provided a strong foundation during the response to the Ebola virus, and that apparatus can also be called upon to respond to Zika. Ongoing preparation for such events includes statewide conference calls that involve health care professionals and state health and emergency response officials regarding appropriate responses for the unique nature of Zika.

VHHA and VDH also jointly support an online health care alerting and status system that facilitates the distribution of critical emergency management information among hospitals and health care providers.

Through collaboration, Virginia’s hospitals also support VDH’s education and prevention efforts. The state health department has developed a series of helpful tips designed to prevent the spread of Zika, including:

- Use an EPA-registered insect repellent spray;
- Wear protective clothing to avoid mosquito bites;
- Tip standing water containers regularly;
- Use condoms during intercourse;
- Seek immediate medical attention if you exhibit Zika symptoms.

In addition to those recommendations, the CDC has offered these tips for travelers:

- Pregnant women are discouraged from traveling to areas where Zika is common;
- Women trying to become pregnant are encouraged to consult a health care provider before traveling;
- Travelers are advised to check Zika travel notices before taking a trip;
- During a trip, travelers are encouraged to follow steps to prevent mosquito bites; and
- Sleep in lodgings with air conditioning or bed netting to prevent mosquito bites.

VHHA staff is engaged in the work of Governor McAuliffe’s Zika Task Force, as are representatives of several member hospitals and health systems, including Carilion Clinic, Mary Washington Medical Group, HCA Virginia’s Henrico Doctors’ Hospital, Virginia Hospital Center, and Mountain States Health Alliance. Questions about the Zika Task Force can be directed to J. Thomas Ryan, M.D., at tryan@vhha.com or Morris D. Reece at mreece@vaems.org. There currently is no vaccine for the Zika virus. If you believe you have contracted the Zika virus, VDH recommends that you contact your health care provider to avoid potentially spreading the virus. Visit www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/zika-virus-update, www.vhha.com/resources/combating-zika, and www.cdc.gov/zika for more useful information on Zika.

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- Use condoms during intercourse.
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**About the Authors**

**J. Thomas Ryan, M.D.**, is VHHA’s Senior Medical Advisor. Prior to joining VHHA, Dr. Ryan served as executive vice president and chief medical officer for Mary Washington Healthcare. Dr. Ryan earned his undergraduate degree from Virginia Tech, and his masters degree and medical degree from VCU’s Medical College of Virginia.

**Morris D. Reece** is the Technical Advisor for VHHA’s Hospital Preparedness Program. Prior to joining VHHA, Reece served as Executive Director of the Near Southwest Preparedness Alliance in Roanoke. He previously was a vice president of Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital, and CEO of Carilion Giles Community Hospital in Pearisburg. Reece earned his masters degree in Health Administration from the Medical College of Virginia.
**HosPAC** is VHHA’s political action committee. The mission of HosPAC is to provide organized and effective political action, and to support state candidates who will work to improve quality health care through policies supported by Virginia’s hospital and health systems. As elected officials in Virginia and Washington make critical decisions affecting Virginia’s hospitals and health systems, HosPAC supports candidates for office whose actions show consideration for Virginia health care providers and the communities they serve. To learn more about HosPAC or to contribute, visit [www.vhha.com/advocacy](http://www.vhha.com/advocacy).

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