Flu vaccine update

This week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that the second phase of the national flu vaccine redistribution plan will soon be getting underway.

The CDC has approximately 7 million doses of vaccine for distribution in Phase 2 that will be allocated to state health departments. The amount to be distributed to each state will be determined by a formula based upon estimated need.

According to the CDC, vaccine will be distributed over several weeks through December and into January.

At this time the Albany County Health Department is not planning to conduct flu vaccination clinics. In order to assure that individuals in the high-risk groups have an opportunity to be vaccinated in a fair and equitable manner, any vaccine the county receives will be distributed to doctors' offices for administration to high-risk individuals who are residents of Albany County, according to a release from the county executive's office.

Cases of flu continue to appear sporadically through New York State. This week a case was confirmed in the town of Westerlo. While the flu season typically runs from December to March in the Capital Region, this finding is consistent with the relatively early arrival of flu downstate and in a number of other upstate counties.

The county states that the following measures can help protect residents and their families from getting sick:

— When possible, avoid close contact with people who have flu-like illness and stay at home when you are ill;

— Have tissues handy to cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing;

— Wash hands frequently to prevent the spread of virus that causes the flu; and

— Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth to prevent the spread of infection.

Residents should continue to visit the county's web site at www.albanycounty.com or call the flu hotline at 447-4505 for updated information.

Fees for ambulance services in New Scotland?

By Holly Grosch

NEW SCOTLAND — Residents of Voorheesville and New Salem may soon be billed for emergency services.

EMS answered 489 calls in New Scotland last year, the public safety commissioner, Doug Miller, told the town board last Wednesday. Currently, residents are not billed for using the EMS services. The town funds emergency services, supplementing each department's fund-raising efforts. The town board is now looking into recovering revenue

New Scotland has a contractual account with Albany County which then hires and pays that one EMT.

In the 2005 budget, the contractual account is allocated $38,976, making up the lion's share of the $49,276 budget for emergency services, which includes equipment, repairs, and vehicle costs.

"The board wanted to revisit the issue of billing," so I made phone calls this week, Miller said at last Wednesday's town board meeting.

'We're a volunteer organization and we have been that way for over 50 years.'

---

from residents who use these services.

The captain of Voorheesville's squad, though, said billing may be unfair to low-income residents and it may also hurt morale among squad volunteers.

There are two ambulance squads in New Scotland. The Voorheesville Area Ambulance Service serves the village of Voorheesville and the New Salem Fire District; and the Onesquethaw Fire Company provides ambulance service to the southern parts of town.

Currently, New Scotland's emergency medical services are volunteer companies, Miller said.

There is one paid emergency medical technician from Albany County Paramedics who floats between Voorheesville's and Onesquethaw's service areas, said Robin Shufelt, the captain of Voorheesville's squad.

This county EMT works from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, Shufelt told The Enterprise.

Voorheesville Ambulance has around-the-clock volunteers who drive and staff the vehicles; but it is short on trained and registered emergency medical technicians during the day-time hours; its handful of volunteer EMT's balance day jobs elsewhere, Shufelt said.

"The way I understand it," Miller told The Enterprise this week, the town can't bill individual's insurance companies themselves, because the municipality is not the one actually providing the medical service.

Instead, the town would have to contract with a private company to do the billing on behalf of the local ambulance services.

The ambulance departments would receive money from the collection agency and the town would work out a system for New Scotland ambulance companies to reimburse the town for the money allocated to emergency services in the annual budget, Miller said.

Miller called a private business in Connecticut that does this billing service for Coeymans; the collection agency bills the person's insurance company. When the insurance company sends back $300 to $350, the collection company gets a percentage of that, Miller said.

Councilman Scott Houghtaling said that he wants to get money to fund the expense of the EMS and thinks this billing process may be a good way to do that.

Councilwoman Andrea Gleason pointed out that this was something that the Altamont ambulance squad is already doing.

If the collection agency doesn't

get money from an individual's health insurance company, it bills the resident directly, Miller said.

The Connecticut company will send the same bill to a resident three times, and if it receives no response, it will not send a fourth bill but will leave it be, and not come after the person or his credit record, Miller said.

This billing process becomes difficult because of the individuals who do not have health insurance and who cannot afford the expense out-of-pocket.

The town can't discriminate and bill only those who have insurance and not send bills to those who may not, the board said.

Miller told The Enterprise that one fear is that people on a fixed income who can't afford to pay won't call the ambulance anymore.

In response, Supervisor Ed Clark told The Enterprise this week, "People who need help don't usually calculate the cost."

He added that neighboring communities which have already installed this billing process haven't had problems and that "usually the general public doesn't have to pay for it."

A great deal of the money could come from the insurance companies, Clark said, adding that "isn't always the case, but frequently it is."

When asked why the town thought this was a good option, Clark said, "Clearly it's a source of revenue to keep cost down."

Miller told the board it would be "illegal" for the town to bill residents who use the Onesquethaw Company's emergency services. "Federal law prohibits the town from doing that," he said.

Miller told The Enterprise this week because Onesquethaw emergency services are part of the fire department, they have separate governmental regulations.

However, the Voorheesville Area Ambulance Service Inc., which is a separate entity from the Voorheesville and New Salem fire departments, is fair game, Miller said.

"There's nothing we can do about that," Clark said of billing for emergency services that are tied to a fire department. He said that it was up to the state legislature and all the town could do was write letters to its representatives.

So, people who live in Voorheesville and New Salem may have to pay for ambulance services while those in Clarksville won't.

Clark said that, yes, this was true, but the expense will primarily fall to insurance companies, and not fall to people in the community, he said.

As for the individuals who do not have insurance, "We would prefer if we didn't have to bill them, but in fairness we do," Clark said.

He said that, ultimately, it would really depend how insistent the town or the collection agency is. Perhaps it doesn't have to be persued relentlessly, Clark said.

Captain's thoughts

"We've always been against billing," Captain Shufelt told The Enterprise. "We're a volunteer organization and we have been that way for over 50 years," she said.

She said she is concerned "people on fixed incomes may not call or may wait too long before calling."

Another disadvantage of the town's plan to gain revenue is that, even if someone has insurance, Shufelt said, the insurance company may not pay the fee in full, and some low-income residents will dip into family funds that go to food or heat, she said.

"The level of morale would go down," Shufelt said of her completely volunteer staff. She added that volunteerism was down across the board, not just in the EMS, but other civic organizations as well, such as the Boy Scouts and church organizations.

Shufelt said, since the town can't bill people in Clarksville, "It wouldn't be fair to all the town members."

"Residents themselves are very happy with the way things are now," Shufelt said.