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UH Law Center releases updated health emergency law manual, plans Nov. 7 event on Ebola response

Oct. 23, 2014 - As the deadly Ebola virus has made its first appearances in the United States, members of the public and government officials are anxious for information on how to deal with the threat. For those officials with authority to compel citizens to remain in quarantine or isolation, it is particularly vital that they know the latest applicable law.

To address this issue, the University of Houston Law Center's Health Law and Policy Institute has released its latest update of a comprehensive manual designed to give Texas judges, other elected officials and law enforcement authorities guidance on legal issues arising from infectious disease outbreaks.

Titled "[Control Measures and Public Health Emergencies: A Texas Bench Book](#)," the manual provides the most up-to-date information on federal and Texas law on how to handle cases involving infectious diseases like Ebola, Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS).

Professor Seth Chandler, director of the Institute, said that the primary value of the revised bench book is that now as Texas officials are dealing with a new situation, namely the potential for an Ebola outbreak. Having the most updated information at their disposal helps them make the best decisions as quickly as possible.

"I truly hope that the book gathers dust," Chandler said. But in the event that it is becomes necessary, officials now have an excellent resource, he said.

In the wake of heightened public concerns after the Ebola virus was transmitted to two Dallas nurses by a Liberian man (now deceased) who had entered the U.S. after becoming infected, the Institute will hold a public health preparedness program on November 7 for law enforcement, county and city government officials, area judges, and public health officials.

The event will be held from 9:00-11:30a.m. at the Law Center on the University of Houston's main campus. It is being spearheaded by UHLC Professor Allison Winnike, who edited the revised bench book over the summer. Winnike will present an overview of the state and federal issues surrounding quarantine and isolation law. Other speakers include Adrian Garcia, Harris County Sheriff; and David Persse, M.D., City of Houston Public Health Authority & EMS Physician Director. To RSVP to the event, email healthlaw@uh.edu by Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2014.

Other topics to be addressed include whether and how health workers should consider quarantine or isolation; law enforcement's role in responding to requests for assistance in situations where quarantine or isolation may arise; and the relationship between port and airport officials with local health authorities and other agencies in relation to quarantine and isolation issues.

The bench book, first published in 2008, has been previously updated to incorporate revisions to federal and state laws, and regulations, said Patricia Gray, research director for the Institute and

one of the book's primary contributing authors.

According to Gray, the idea for the bench book originally arose out of concerns about a pandemic flu threat as well as potential terrorism threats as were seen after 9/11. The first version, published in 2008, was initiated following discussions of uncertainty about when and how officials can compel citizens to remain in quarantine or isolation, as well as the distinct differences between the two statuses.

While the bench book has been routinely updated following biannual sessions of the Texas Legislature, Gray said the Institute decided to update it again after concerns arose earlier this year about a potential MERS patient and before the upcoming 2015 session. The latest version also reflects some recodification of federal statutes that have taken effect since the last version, she said.

The bench book includes flow charts that clearly delineate lines of authority as well as sample forms that officials can use.

The bench book is being distributed electronically to officials across the state -- including judges at the trial court and appellate levels, county judges and commissioners, local and state law enforcement officials, as well as to public health officials, Gray said.

"The bench book is a good tool that local courts and county administrative officers can use for situations that don't come up very often," Gray said. "It gives them up-to-date information on what their powers are, and arms them with information to address questions that members of the public may have," Gray said.

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