swine flu worries prompt record visits to local ERs

By Alan Suderman

A record number of patients have flooded some Washington-area hospi- tals fearing they have contracted the swine flu, but there had been no confirmed cases of the disease as of Tuesday afternoon.

Takoma Park’s Washington Adventist Hospital has been aver- aging 20 extra emergency room patients a day since Friday, includ- ing a record-breaking 67 visitors Monday, according to a spokes- woman.

Many patients who were con- cerned they might have the swine flu complained of allergy symptoms, spokeswoman Lydia Parris said. “There’s a lot of pollen in the air right now,” Parris said.

It was a similar scene at Subur- ban Hospital in Bethesda, which had a record-breaking day Sunday, largely because of allergy sufferers who thought they might have the swine flu, according to a spokes- woman.

Symptoms of swine flu include runny nose or nasal congestion, cough, sore throat and a fever higher than 100 degrees.

Two hospitals in suburban Vir- ginia also saw an increase in ER visitors concerned about swine flu, according to spokespeople.

The virus has killed dozens in Mexico, has infected more than 60 in five states in the U.S. and has spread to at least two corners of the globe.

Hospital officials said that patients who are exhibiting flu-like symptoms should try to consult with their personal physician before going to the emergency room.

Local governments have stepped up efforts to try to combat any potential outbreak of the disease, including establishing hot lines and starting public education cam- paigns to encourage people to wash their hands more often.

Metro officials said they were continuing a flu-season program of wiping down surfaces throughout the transit system with “hospital- grade disinfectant” because of the swine flu outbreak.

Metro trains and station equip- ment are disinfected daily, officials said, with buses disinfected at least every 14 days.

Montgomery weighs reworking disability pay

Proposed measure would create two-tiered system for all county employees

By Alan Suderman

The Montgomery County Coun- cil is stuck on how to overhaul the county’s disability pension system amid debates over whether to tie the payoff amount for hurt police offi- cers to the severity of their injury.

Council President Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville, who has co-sponsored legislation seeking more oversight into the disability pensions program, promised Tues- day that the council would vote on the measure next week.

The announcement came a day after County Executive Ike Leggett and the Fraternal Order of Police union failed to reach an agreement on disability pay after months of effort.

Currently, police officers injured in the line of duty who receive dis- ability pay receive about two-thirds of their salary in a tax-free pension, regardless of the nature of their injury. A report by the county’s inspector general found that half of the police who retired in a three-year period qualified for disability pay, including some who went on to work physically demanding jobs.

In the last 24 years, 40 percent of officers have retired claiming a disability, according to the Fraternal Order of Police.

The proposed legislation would institute a two-tiered disability pay for all county employees: One for partially injured workers that would pay pensions at 52.5 percent of an employee’s salary, and one for fully injured employees, who would receive 70 percent.

County council staff said the majority of police officers who receive disability pay suffered from orthopedic injuries that would be considered partial disability, and the county would save between $1 million and $2.8 million a year by switching to a two-tiered system.

Andrews said the two-tiered system, which is modeled on the disability pay system for county firefighters, “makes intuitive sense” because it pays less money to hurt police officers who are still able to find substantial employment despite their injuries and more money to offi- cers who are totally incapacitated.

“It’s hard to make a case against a two-tier system,” Andrews said.

The police union has argued against the proposed changes and said the county’s firefighters agreed to a two-tier system in “exchange for significant pension benefit improve- ments.”

Councilman Mike Knapp, D- Upcounty, said he hadn’t heard a compelling reason why the system should be changed.

“It doesn’t appear to be addressing a specific problem,” he said.

The proposed legislation also would change how the county deter- mines whether an employee has been disabled, including requiring an independent medical examination.

Montgomey County Council

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What kind of products are being advertised in the two featured newspapers (VIRGINIA » HOUSING and THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW)?

The Virginia Department of Transportation is featured in THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW, suggesting an advertisement for transportation-related products. However, the text does not provide specific details about the nature of the advertisement.

The second newspaper focuses on housing issues in Virginia, with a mention of the Fairfax plan to buy foreclosures and the Montgomery County Council's discussion on disability pension systems. These articles suggest a discussion on real estate and employment benefits, respectively.

What are the main benefits of the Fairfax plan to buy foreclosures?

The Fairfax County supervisors say they’re angry with county staff because a plan to buy, fix and resell foreclosed homes has gone nowhere. This indicates a lack of progress and dissatisfaction with the current process. The plan aims to address the issue of foreclosed homes, which can lead to blighted neighborhoods and a decrease in property values.

What is the core issue being addressed in the Montgomery County Council’s discussion on disability pension systems?

The core issue is how to overhaul the county’s disability pension system. There is debate over whether to tie the pension amount for injured police officers to the severity of their injury. The proposal would institute a two-tiered system, which has been met with opposition by the county’s police union.

What is the significance of the swine flu outbreak in Washington-area hospitals and the public’s reaction?

The swine flu outbreak has led to an increase in ER visits at Washington-area hospitals, with some hospitals seeing record-breaking days. The public’s reaction has been to take extra precautions, such as washing their hands more often, even though no confirmed cases of the disease have been reported. The public’s concern highlights the need for continued education and awareness about the virus.