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Public Employee Press

Safety alert

City may draft workers for West Nile spraying

By MOLLY CHARBONEAU

Because no pest-control firms have bid for the work this year, the city may draft public employees, including DC 37 members, to spray for mosquitoes that cause West Nile virus.

The deadline for bids on the estimated \$3.5 million project passed with no takers, due either to the size of the job or the fear of lawsuits. Clarke Environmental, which did last year's spraying, was fined \$1 million June 4 for failing to properly train and supervise its workers, putting their health and the public's at risk.

"As soon as we learned the city might assign DC 37 members to do spraying, we contacted the Office of Labor Relations for a list of affected titles," said Lee Clarke, head of DC 37's Safety and Health Unit. "If members conduct any spraying, we are going to be vigilant to make sure the city doesn't make the same mistakes Clarke Environmental did." The union will push for proper training, personal protective equipment and other safeguards typical for work with chemicals, she said.

During last year's mosquito season, beginning in May, union members who work in pest control were assigned to apply larvicide to areas where mosquito eggs might hatch. However, this is less hazardous than spraying because the larvicide is in solid form.

DC 37's Research and Negotiations Dept. is following up with OLR to identify potentially affected members. The preliminary list includes park and pest control workers.

Meanwhile, the Safety and Health Unit is ready to assist members tapped for mosquito spraying who feel their agency is falling short on training and safety.

"These members should contact their union rep if they are called on to do anything they feel puts them at risk, especially if they have not been properly trained or if they have not been given adequate protective equipment," Ms. Clarke said.

If a member is assigned to work as an apprentice under a certified exterminator, that person must be on-site during the extermination work, she added.

The Safety and Health Unit has also updated its West Nile virus fact sheet to include suggested clothing for high-risk areas and more details on the application of DEET insect repellent.

Members who work outdoors in high-risk areas with standing water — such as Lifeguards, park workers, Sewage Treatment Workers and others in DEP, Motor Vehicle Operators and DOH workers in pest control and public education — should know the facts about West Nile.

For more information or copies of the fact sheet, members should call their union representative or division. (See Grievances section on page 29 for phone numbers.)

2001 West Nile Virus Fact Sheet

West Nile virus can cause flu-like symptoms and, in rare cases, encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain.

Transmission

The virus is transmitted by the bite of a mosquito that is infected with West Nile virus. Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds. During later mosquito blood feedings, the virus is transmitted to an animal or human, where it multiplies and may cause illness. The West Nile virus is NOT transmitted person-to-person, animal-to-person or bird-to-person. Mosquitoes breed in stagnant water, puddles and swampy areas.

Signs and Symptoms

Many people infected with West Nile virus never develop any signs or symptoms. Others, particularly the elderly, can develop mild symptoms. It usually takes five to 15 days for symptoms to appear. Mild symptoms include fever, headache and body aches, and are accompanied by skin rashes and swollen lymph glands. More severe infections may be marked by headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, paralysis and, rarely, death.

Treatment

There is no vaccine against West Nile virus. If you think you have West Nile virus, you should see your doctor as soon as possible.

Prevention

Outdoor workers, and those involved in the mosquito control activities, should:

- Wear long sleeves and long pants, preferably of light-colored, breathable fabric, when working in high-risk areas.
- Receive training on the proper use of insecticides, pesticides and larvicides used for mosquito control. Be informed about the hazards associated with overexposure to such products.
- Receive training on proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE) listed on the labels and material safety data sheets (MSDS) of mosquito control products. The agency must provide the appropriate PPE free of charge.
- Follow all instructions given on the pesticide, insecticide and larvicide labels and MSDS. These chemicals are closely regulated by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.
- Use the insect repellent provided by the employer. Instructions on the use of the repellent should be provided, and an MSDS and labels should be readily available.

Insect Repellent

The insect repellent provided by your employer should:

- Contain 20%–30% DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide).*
- Be applied sparingly to exposed skin and clothes.

The following precautions should be followed when applying repellents:

- Do not apply over cuts, wounds or irritated skin.
- Use just enough repellent to cover exposed skin and/or clothes.
- Do not use under clothing.
- Avoid overapplication of this product.
- After returning indoors, wash all treated skin with soap and water.
- Wash treated clothing before wearing it again.
- Do not spray in enclosed areas.
- To apply to face, spray on hands first and then rub on face. Do not spray directly onto face.
- DEET is effective for approximately 4 hours. If you are outside for more than 4 hours, re-apply.

If you have any questions about the insecticides, larvicides, pesticides, repellents and personal protective equipment your employer is using, please call your union representative or division.

*Do not use DEET if you are pregnant. Also, in rare cases, lotions containing DEET may cause skin reactions. If you experience any type of skin irritation, notify your supervisor and seek medical attention. Call your union representative for assistance with appropriate accommodation.