DC-area veterinarians on heightened alert amid potential inauguration risks

Veterinarians in the Washington, DC region have been put on alert for any unusual illnesses in their non-human patients amid today's presidential inauguration—a nod to the significance of potential zoonotic bioterror threats.

In a recent letter to Virginia veterinarians, the state health department requested assistance in the "enhanced surveillance," while noting that, currently, there is no report of threats or bioterrorism-related illnesses.

"As with any large-scale public event, there will be heightened security, and the region will be on alert or signs of bioterrorism or other potential threats," the letter read. "Enhanced surveillance is being conducted out of an abundance of caution."

Health officials are asking veterinarians to report any animals who develop an unusual, severe illness within 14 days of exposure to the National Mall area during the inaugural period between January 19 and January 21. The cases could include animals who travel to the area or who live there. If such a case arises, veterinarians should report the case "rapidly by phone" to the officials in the state's Zoonotic Disease Program. That includes State Public Health Veterinarian Julia Murphy.

In an interview with Ars Technica, Murphy noted that the health department has requested enhanced surveillance from veterinarians in the past. "We did a similar thing for the

last inauguration," she said.

The recruitment of veterinarians highlights the threat posed by zoonotic diseases—that is, those that can transmit between animals and humans. And it demonstrates the value of a "One Health" approach to health, which recognizes the interconnection between animals, humans, and shared environments.

In emerging outbreaks or bioterror events, animal illnesses have the potential to act as sentinels—the first to show signs of a disease—as well as be informative for understanding the geographic scope and severity of an event, Murphy explained. For instance, the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*, which causes a potentially serious illness called tularemia, is particularly dangerous for rabbits and rodents. "Their incubation period can be quite short—typically, not always—but it can often be shorter than in people," she said, referring to the time between an exposure to an illness and when symptoms develop. *F. tularensis* is considered a potential bioterror weapon and appears on the federal list of Select Agents and Toxins.

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