

Swine flu has D.C. pointing fingers By: Erika Lovley April 27, 2009 07:09 PM

<http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=E9D73DFA-18FE-70B2-A82E0>

Reports of swine flu outbreaks have come in from five different states so far. Washington has caught is a contagious case of finger-pointing.

As the cable networks went 24/7 with influenza coverage Monday, liberal blame was heaped after Republican Sens. Susan Collins and Arlen Specter for working to slice off a portion in pandemic planning funds from President Barack Obama's economic stimulus package.

A spokesman for Collins seemed to shift some of the blame to the Obama administration, noting the unfilled seats at the Department of Health and Human Services. The American Nurses Employees International Union, in turn, blamed Senate Republicans for a delay in confirming HHS nominee Kathleen Sebelius.

This kind of partisan sniping, of course, is the congressional equivalent of finger-pointing. But what about an event that would really capture lawmakers' attention — something like the dreaded virus on Capitol Hill?

Congress' attending physician and the House sergeant at arms are working to prepare for the case a flu pandemic hits Capitol Hill. A "Dear Colleague" letter sent out Monday by the Office of the Attending Physician stressed hand washing and encouraged lawmakers to leave work if they fall ill.

"It is unknown if the current swine influenza strain could trigger a pandemic," said the attending physician Brian Monahan. "However, the potential exists, and so it is advisable for individuals, offices and other groups take the time to review their plans for emergency procedures, emergencies and keep abreast of any new developments in regarding the current situation."

But health experts say that, by the time Capitol officials realize they've got a problem on their hands, it may be too late to do much about it: The virus would be spreading, bouncing from lawmaker to lawmaker, staffer to staffer, transmitted by coughs and sneezes.

sneezes.

If you're already feeling queasy, stop reading.

Germs could be smeared on chairs on the House and Senate floor, on elevators in the House and Senate office buildings and even on the microphones in the hearing rooms.

According to the research of epidemiologist Donald Henderson, who directed the Department of Health and Human Services's Office of Public Health Emergency Preparedness after Sept. 11, as much as 25 percent of Congress could eventually become infected.

But Henderson says it is unlikely that the Capitol building would be completely closed or that Congress would be dismissed.

"I would not anticipate any real interruption," Henderson said. Why?

Based on his research, Henderson said it's likely that — even assuming only 10 percent of members of Congress caught swine flu — only 10 percent would be expected to show symptoms at any time. That means at the most, something like 54 House members would likely be absent on a given day, a number unlikely to bring the legislative gears to a halt.

"The evidence we have so far is that people who have the disease in the United States have an illness that is no more severe than normal influenza," Henderson said. "The likelihood is to be that many people out with the flu at any given time."

The attending physician's office would be responsible for spearheading any containment movement, including warning lawmakers to stay home and potentially dispensing antiviral medication like TamiFlu if needed.

Images from an infected New York school this week showed cleaning crews scrubbing classroom desks and chairs, but Rep. Bill Cassidy (R-La.), a physician, said it would be too hard to disinfect the thousands of desks and chairs in the Senate and House chambers, hearing rooms and offices.

A more likely scenario: Hearings and votes could be canceled.

"There's no way you're going to be able to wipe down the entirety of any building in the U.S. government," he said. "The CDC recommends that infected schools close and it would probably be the same for Congress."

It wouldn't be the first time Congress considered the idea.

According to the Senate Historian's office, Congress debated going out of town when a flu epidemic killed at least 20 million people worldwide.

Congress fled from Philadelphia in 1793 when a yellow fever outbreak killed including several lawmakers.

Members of Congress — with heavy travel schedules and constant contact with people — may be uniquely susceptible to communicable diseases. But the aspects of the Capitol Hill lifestyle that could make lawmakers less susceptible to swine flu.

Health experts say federal buildings are well-ventilated. So, too, are most homes that members of Congress take back and forth from their districts. "Every place has air filters that filter out viruses," said Henderson. "When you deal with the outdoors, your risk of getting infected is probably less than sitting in a hearing room." Lawmakers might be encouraged to wear face masks, but Henderson says that Congress would turn into a sea of surgical masks. They're uncomfortable and become ineffective when moisture clogs the mask pores, and they look ludicrous — an opposition TV ad waiting to be made. Said Henderson: "The only thing that might inhibit members' debate."

