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## Wichita Eagle, The (KS)

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### COUNTY LAUNCHES 'SMOKE DETECTOR' FOR BIOTERROR

LORI O'TOOLE BUSELT, *The Wichita Eagle*

Were you one of the 1,500 people who bought cough syrup Tuesday in Sedgwick **County**?

Or maybe you know one of the two people who called 911 between 4 a.m. and 4 p.m. Wednesday because they were having difficulty breathing. The **county's** health department has several new tools to stay informed about **county** health trends, including computer programs that track over-the-counter medicine purchases and 911 calls.

The tools give health officials a way to tell immediately whether an infectious disease such as the flu or SARS is plaguing the community.

And it will allow them to respond more quickly if terrorists release anthrax or smallpox in the Wichita area.

The program is a "smoke detector for bioterrorism" said Matthew Ferguson, project manager of FirstWatch, the new computer program for tracking emergency calls.

On Wednesday, FirstWatch began collecting data on medical calls to 911 in Sedgwick **County**.

The **county** paid about \$24,000 for FirstWatch, said Gloria Vermie, the **county's** public health emergency management coordinator.

It is able to compare the number of emergency calls with seasonal averages and will automatically notify officials if there is a spike in medical problems.

That way, the **county** can identify problems as they're happening - or before they spread - rather than relying on doctors and hospitals to identify trends.

For the past six months, the **county** also has been tracking the sale of over-the-counter medicines through a federal computer database.

It showed, for example, that Sedgwick **County** residents purchased 38 thermometers Tuesday at several local branches of a national pharmacy company. **County** officials say they don't know which company because the information comes from the federal database.

The database records the number of items sold but not the names of the individual buyers, Vermie said.

Over-the-counter sales could be a first warning of bioterrorism in Wichita because many chemicals cause people to feel like they have the flu, Vermie said.

And when people have the flu, the first thing they typically do is head for the drugstore.

The database is not very reliable, Vermie said, because it includes the sales records of only one company, making it difficult to tell the difference between a legitimate purchase and an epidemic.

The health department also is turning to school nurses to help track the community's health.

Officials contact nurses at seven Wichita elementary schools several times a week to learn what types of symptoms kids are experiencing and how many stayed home sick.

The **county** tracks children's health, Vermie said, because they are more susceptible to diseases and chemicals and are more likely than adults to admit when they don't feel well.

The **county** hopes to expand FirstWatch to collect information on paramedics' and emergency rooms' diagnoses of medical emergencies.

The **county** also wants to join with Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Johnson **County** and Kansas City, Mo., to gather information regionally.

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