Leukemia case count increasing

By Dan McCaleb
Iberia Bureau editor

COTEAU At least a dozen cases of leukemia have now been identified within a 10-mile radius of this small Iberia Parish community, where news of the cancerous disease prompted residents to call for a state investigation into potential environmental causes of the cluster.

New Iberia chemist and environmental consultant Wilma Subra said she gets calls almost every day from individuals wanting to provide information about other leukemia cases in the area.

"It's been frantic, but we've been able to identify a number of other cases of leukemia in the Coteau, Youngsville and Delcambre area," she said.

"We seem to be getting more and more information in every day. We're in this thing together." Subra has been helping area residents gather information about the clusters since last month, a short time after 8-year-old Jessica Viator of Coteau was diagnosed with leukemia.

Jessica is the fourth child who lived within the 10-mile radius in Coteau diagnosed with the sometimes fatal disease since 1986, an extremely high number of cases for such a small area.

Two of those children, both of them boys, have died from leukemia. Two are still in remission in Jessica and another girl.

But after Coteau residents called for a town meeting in late April to discuss water and water information about other leukemia cases nearby began flowing in.

Subra said three definite cases have been confirmed in nearby Youngsville in South Lafayette Parish, and she is still in the process of confirming another two leukemia cases in Youngsville and one in Broussard.

"Residents in the three in Youngsville that we have already confirmed, I understand that there may be two others from there who died from leukemia a few years back," she said.

"We're still trying to confirm those and another report (of a dead leukemia victim) in (neighboring) Broussard."

Also, a woman who lives on L. Theriot Road in rural Iberia Parish, near Coteau, is a confirmed leukemia patient, and three other adults who live off of La. 14 near Delcambre have been diagnosed with the disease as well.

In addition, leukemia cases also have been identified in other Acadia townships such as Scott, Mane, Creole, and possibly in Abbeville and Arnaudville.

"There's no way to know at this point if any of these, if any, are connected," Subra said.

Meanwhile, community leaders in Coteau called a town meeting May 22 to update residents on the leukemia cases and potential hazardous waste sites that could be contaminating the environment.

The meeting will be held in the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Catholic Church hall at 7 p.m.