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### Area prepares for swine flu

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ESCANABA - On June 11, the World Health Organization declared the H1N1 influenza virus is in a pandemic stage, meaning the virus is spreading from person to person worldwide. The H1N1 flu virus is currently circulating across the country.

"Public Health officials are predicting increased activity of the H1N1 virus," said Mark Weber, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator for Public Health, Delta & Menominee Counties (PHDM). "As we get closer to fall, the numbers of cases are expected to increase."

According to Barb Chenier, Health Officer Administrator of PHDM, the Michigan Department of Community Health has been holding periodic teleconferences with local health departments to provide guidance on how to prepare for the expected H1N1 outbreak. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has now published priority groups for the H1N1 vaccine, selecting those populations that may be at high risk for getting the infection and/or at high risk for complications. Youth, aged 6 months to 24 years of age are one of the priority groups for vaccination, as are pregnant women, adults 25-64 years of age with chronic medical conditions, health care/Emergency Medical Services workers and household contacts of infants under 6 months of age.

"Our planning is focusing on how to reach those populations," said Chenier.

One way the department is reaching the younger population is by meeting with all the school superintendents in both counties to make them aware that school age children are a priority group for receiving the vaccine. This includes K-12, child care centers, and colleges. Chenier said the spread of the H1N1 influenza will most likely pick up once school is in session. Health officials have spoken to the superintendents about setting up vaccine clinics in the schools, although it is difficult to set a firm date, because health officials still do not know when the vaccine, which is currently being tested, will be released.

"We are expecting the vaccine to become available sometime this fall," said Chenier. "It will be released in batches, so if we get only a small amount at first, we'll administer the doses to the people who are highest priority. We're moving forward so that when the vaccine comes out, we have a plan in place and are ready to administer it."

While the vaccine, which is intended to prevent a person from getting the virus, is not out yet, there are already anti-viral medications out that can treat the symptoms of the virus and can make the illness less severe. Patients who are experiencing the H1N1 virus symptoms may get a prescription, if indicated, for the anti-viral medication from their physician.

Another way the health department has prepared themselves is by reaching out to licensed nurses in both counties to recruit them as volunteers to assist during vaccine administrations. Over 270 nurses have registered themselves to volunteer and assist local health officials.

"We don't have enough staff here so an important part of planning for our H1N1 vaccination clinics is having available volunteers," added Chenier.

Weber added, "If the H1N1 virus does become more severe, there will be a huge demand on the vaccine, and then we'll need more volunteer help. We're very fortunate there was such an interest from the local nursing community to help."

Weber said the health department will also work closely with local hospitals and healthcare providers before and during the upcoming flu season.

Lanna Scannell, OSF St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, community relations coordinator, said the hospital has a county-wide influenza preparedness planning committee that works on educating the public on how to stay healthy, and avoid contracting illnesses.

Public education will be a really important part of their H1N1 response," said Chenier. "We want to ensure people have accurate information and know what to expect."

The vast majority of H1N1 flu cases continue to be mild to moderate in terms of symptoms, with a relatively small number of individuals hospitalized or dying due to this illness, Miller said.

#### Article Photos



From left, Mark Weber, emergency preparedness coordinator for Public Health, Delta & Menominee Counties (PHDM), Jennie Miller, communicable diseases coordinator for PHDM and Barb Chenier, health officer administrator of PHDM, discuss preparation strategies for the increase in activity of the H1N1 virus, expected to occur nationwide this fall.

"Because this is a new virus and there is little immunity to it in the general population, it makes it difficult to determine how much of an effect the virus could have if it changes, as flu viruses often do," she said. "We currently have no way of knowing whether the virus will cause more serious illness over time."

The health department has provided pandemic influenza training to staff to educate them on the symptoms of flu and how they can protect themselves. They have also increased personal protection equipment for staff including gloves, masks, respirators, gowns, and hand sanitizing gel.

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