



NIAGARA COUNTY
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**COUNTY TAKES PROACTIVE APPROACH TO H1N1
HEALTH DEPT ORGANIZES PLANNERS, FIRST RESPONDERS TO BATTLE FLU**

LOCKPORT—With a “second surge” of the H1N1 virus hitting this fall projected to be far more dangerous than this spring’s first encounter with the virus, Niagara County’s public health officials are taking a proactive stance and marshalling resources to combat the virus.

With a four-hour collaborative workshop drawing more than 130 first responders and representatives of various state and federal agencies to the Niagara County Public Safety Training Facility Tuesday morning, County Public Health Director Dan Stapleton and Public Health Planning and Information Officer Elaine Roman hope to build the infrastructure to effectively combat the disease when it makes a probably reappearance in the months ahead.

They’ll be joined by local elected officials, representatives of the Niagara County Sheriff’s Office and other police agencies, firefighters, EMT technicians and other representatives of first responder agencies, Niagara County Risk Management, Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station, U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, hospitals, schools, healthcare non-profits, and large corporations. Roman and Stapleton will present the latest information from federal and state agencies to attendees, who will then break into work groups tasked with collaborating to devise strategies to prevent public health and first responder infrastructure from being overwhelmed by a “worst-case” H1N1 outbreak.

“We’re meeting with all of the public officials and key planners and decision-makers in Niagara County, and we’re also having folks from the state and federal level at this meeting,” Roman explained. “This is a strategy meeting—it’s a policy meeting for how we are going to address H1N1 in Niagara County and how we are going to vaccinate all of these target populations when the vaccines arrive here in Niagara County.”

Roman said that vaccine would be distributed to target those identified as the most-vulnerable populations, including those whose ages make them most susceptible, pregnant women, and first-responders that would come into contact with the disease in executing their duties.

“We need to vaccinate all individuals between the ages of six months and 24 years,” Roman said, noting that school nurses would be key partners at the meeting. “We have issues with the pregnant population. Pregnant women are at four-fold risk of hospitalization because of complications of H1N1 infection.”

Roman noted that each of the planning groups at Tuesday’s workshop would also be devising strategies to deal with legal questions likely to come up in any mass vaccination effort.

“There’s a lot that needs to be done,” Roman, who was busily preparing scores of information packets for workshop attendees, said. “We have legal issues that we’ll be discussing. We’ll be refining our existing policies and developing new ones.”

Roman also noted that the county would be devising strategies to utilize EMTs and other first responders in vaccination efforts, and would be working to ensure that those individuals would receive needed vaccinations themselves.

“We’re looking at our advanced EMTs and paramedics, to allow them to become vaccinators,” Roman said. “It would sure be great to have them on the vaccination lines with us. And also, first responders are a priority group to receive vaccines. They’ll need to be safe before they go out into the field.”

Roman said the workshop, formally called the “Niagara County Public Health Advisory Partnership Meeting,” was prompted by Stapleton’s goal of meeting the serious health challenge head-on, ensuring the county wouldn’t be caught flat-footed.

“We don’t know what to expect, but we know from past history with pandemics that the first surge usually is relatively mild, while the second surge generally has proven to be much more severe in complications and fatality rates,” she said. “We want to make sure that we’re prepared for that and that we’re protecting our population here in Niagara County. That’s why we need to do this.”

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