



NIAGARA COUNTY  
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COUNTY HEALTH TARGETS H1N1 HIGH-PRIORITY POPULATIONS  
SKLARSKI URGES VULNERABLE TO SEEK VACCINATION

LOCKPORT—A four-hour Tuesday work session that brought 130 medical personnel, first responders, policymakers, and other stakeholders together in Niagara County to devise a strategy for combating H1N1 left county health officials focusing on immunizing high-priority populations when vaccines become available.

The conference, held ahead of the start of the school year, a critical time for communicable diseases, saw local elected officials, representatives of the Niagara County Sheriff's Office and other police agencies, firefighters, EMT technicians, fire chiefs, 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 gather together to put the county ahead of a second wave of the viral H1N1 flu.

"We're on the down-slope of the first wave," Public Health Director Dan Stapleton said. "The second wave is what we're concerned with now. Once the children are back in school, commingling and in close proximity to each other, we want to make sure that the schools are ready to help us protect the public. They play a very important role in that."

Stapleton noted that the conference drew school administrators, school nurses, and other educators to help position schools as a key front line in the anticipated fight against H1N1's resurgence.

"It was a great show of support for the community," Stapleton said. "Everyone's on the same page, and we're working together to protect the public."

Stapleton was joined by Niagara County Legislator Danny Sklarski, D-Niagara, who implored local residents to make sure that the most vulnerable members of the population are immunized against H1N1 as vaccine stockpiles become available.

"We don't know how severe it's going to be," Sklarski said. "Based on the information received, the first wave of H1N1 was relatively mild, but all indications are when the second wave hits, it's more severe. How severe is yet to be determined, however, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Sklarski said that today's conference and work session would lead directly to formalized county policies for dealing with H1N1.

"The county is drawing up a policy for the distribution of the H1N1 shots—that's going to be determined," Sklarski said. "They're going to be targeting those at the highest risk. That information will be in your local media."

Sklarski urged parents to make sure their children between the ages of six months and 24 years receive the vaccinations, as well as pregnant women and first responders.

It was this last category of high-risk individuals that rounded out Tuesday's conference in Lockport, and whose immunizations were a key area of concern for county planners.

John Cecula, assistant director of emergency services for Niagara County, said that the meeting had served to fully integrate first responders with county health officials and others that would be involved in fighting any large-scale outbreak of H1N1 or other future contagions.

Cecula noted that one of the primary benefits to first responders was the opportunity to meet their counterparts and develop working relationships before any large-scale response becomes necessary.

"This is one of many meetings that will probably be taking place in the future to determine how to handle H1N1," Cecula said. "I would rather meet these other people in this setting, than if we have to set up an emergency point of dispensing."

Stapleton said that, while Tuesday's event drove home the seriousness the Niagara County Health Department assigns to H1N1, it actually represents the culmination of years of drills and training that have prepared the county to rapidly react to any large-scale public health crisis.

"The role of the Health Department is to protect the public," Stapleton said. "We're responsible for doing that. Elected officials are responsible for that. Other county departments are responsible for that. Schools. Hospitals. All those people. We've been practicing and planning for years and years, and this is exactly what we've been planning for."

Stapleton said that the county's proactive stance would be critical in dealing with any widespread outbreak.

"Rather than wait for it to happen, we wanted to make sure we prepared ahead of time to react to this properly," Stapleton said.

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