

Responding to a New Flu and Overcoming New Challenges.

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Our state's health department has the important role of informing people about the flu and letting them know when vaccines will be available to help protect them. We do this based on information and guidance from the federal CDC, the agency responsible for working with manufacturers to produce the vaccines.

Since April, we have witnessed unprecedented demands on public health at every level of government in responding to the first flu pandemic in forty years. And, by in large, public health has responded admirably to the challenge. However, as we have seen recently, there will be temporary obstacles along the way that we must overcome.

While there is considerable experience producing safe and effective flu vaccine in this country, the challenge of producing hundreds of millions of doses of both seasonal and H1N1 vaccines at the same time presents a significant challenge for the vaccine manufacturers. The result is that the supplies of both types of vaccine are getting to our state and the rest of the country much slower than everyone had hoped. The original timetable for receipt of the H1N1 vaccine was adjusted recently because of unexpected production challenges. This meant that local clinics in the process of being planned had to be abruptly cancelled. This is extremely frustrating to the public, and for those of

us in public health who know our residents are counting on us.

The challenges with development of the vaccines have unfortunately led to what some believe are mixed messages. One day the public hears “getting vaccinated is very important and you should do it as soon as possible”. The next day they hear that “the vaccine is not ready yet.” This is confusing to the public and exasperating for the local health departments that are stepping up to take the responsibility for getting vaccine into the arms of people across the Commonwealth. Being the bearer of bad news is never enviable, but we have an obligation to tell people what we know, when we know it -- especially during times of uncertainty. While the delays in vaccine production have been frustrating, we have been assured by the CDC that by the end of November there will be approximately one million doses of the H1N1 vaccine in Massachusetts. And millions of additional doses are scheduled to arrive in December and January. Our vaccination efforts should and will continue into the winter months.

Some have asked questions about vaccine safety. The H1N1 vaccine is made in exactly the same way as seasonal flu vaccine, which has an excellent safety record. The vaccine has had considerable human testing and has undergone the same strict quality control standards as the seasonal flu vaccine. The bottom line is that H1N1 vaccine is safe, and it is the single most effective way to prevent the flu.

As we wait for an adequate supply of vaccine to arrive, we want to reinforce a few important messages:

1. Both H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccine will continue to be delivered to the state throughout the fall and into the winter. We ask for your patience as we gather quantities sufficient to hold public clinics free of charge.
2. The initial priority groups for the H1N1 vaccine are children, pregnant women and health care workers with direct patient care contact. Hundreds of thousands of H1N1 vaccine have already been administered to these populations within Massachusetts in clinical settings. These sites will continue to offer vaccine as supplies allow. When we have sufficient supply, we will make it available to a much broader group of people.
3. Besides vaccines, please remember a few simple steps about how to take care of yourself and your friends and family: wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer; cover your mouth when you cough; and stay home if you are sick.

Public H1N1 vaccination clinics will also be posted on the <http://flu.masspro.org> website when they are scheduled - although they are unlikely before December. General information on the H1N1 flu is available on the www.mass.gov/flu web site.

