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Prevention will be schools' golden rule for H1N1

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By Shana Wickett, Special to the Register

As parents get ready to stock backpack pockets with miniature hand sanitizer bottles and handfuls of vitamin C drops, health departments and school boards are also taking steps to prevent the spread of the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, in schools this fall.

"We do anticipate more illness from H1N1 influenza than this past spring, and more school-based outbreaks because influenza-type viruses transmit more easily in the fall and winter," said William Gerrish, spokesman for the state Department of Public Health.

"We know more about the 2009 H1N1 flu virus than we did when it arrived in April, and we know that in most cases, closing schools is not the best option," he added. "The new guidance that has come out provides schools with some (recommendations) they can use to stay open while doing what they can to protect students and staff."

The DPH has been in close communication with the state Department of Education and local health departments via conferences, conference calls and meetings, said Gerrish.

The DPH is focusing on CDC-recommended prevention techniques, such as frequent hand washing and covering coughs, isolating those who are symptomatic, advising students and staff members to stay home while symptomatic and for at least 24 hours after fevers break, and helping families to identify children at high risk for complications.

If the spread of the H1N1 virus is more severe than it was in the spring, recommendations include extending the time symptomatic students and staff members stay home, allowing those at high risk for complications to stay away, actively watching for signs of illness, and considering pre-emptive dismissal, said Gerrish.

According to the DPH, 1,910 Connecticut residents had tested positive for H1N1 as of Wednesday. There have been nine H1N1-related deaths in the state.

The New Haven Health Department and the school board have been meeting regularly and plan to meet with school administrators to prepare them with materials for H1N1 virus prevention in the classroom, officials said.

"(The district) has been working all summer long to make sure come September, we've got plans in place," said Michelle Wade, director of communications for New Haven Public Schools.

Posters and brochures will be dispersed to schools, and orientation packets including information about prevention, procedures and school closures will be distributed to about 20,000 students and their parents, said Wade.

New Haven Public Schools also purchased 400 dispensers and 561 cartridges of hand sanitizer with \$9,918 set aside from the facilities and cleaning budget, officials said.

"Knowing that (H1N1) is going to be around again this year, they decided to figure out how best facilities could contribute to keeping students safe and healthy," said Wade.

The Health Department will be vigilant about classroom cleaning, and school assemblies will emphasize prevention, said Kenneth Rubano, assistant director of environmental health and emergency response at the New Haven Health Department.

The Quinnipiack Valley Health District has maintained contact with public health officials and superintendents in its five school districts: Amity, Bethany, Hamden, North Haven and Woodbridge, said Leslie Balch, director of health at the QVHD, which is preparing communication with parents to promote CDC and DPH recommendations.

Milford schools plan to continue conversations to minimize exposure with letters, newsletter articles and recorded phone messages, said Superintendent Harvey Polansky.

"I think we are prepared, but the magnitude of the virus spreading is all a big question mark at this point," he said.

Dr. A. Dennis McBride, health director at the Milford Health Department, said schools should be closed only when the "most extreme" measures must be taken.

"It's going to require a lot of education. I think that the panic isn't very useful at all in this situation," said McBride. "The objective is to keep schools as safe as possible and minimize the need for closure."

Residence life staff training at Southern Connecticut State University will include H1N1 education and procedures for managing ill students or an outbreak on campus, said Dr. Diane Morgenthaler, director of student health services.

Plans also include assigning a triage nurse to assess students' symptoms by phone and analyze whether they require further evaluation; supplying students with "flu kits," equipped with medicine, thermometers and hand sanitizer; maintaining the university's supply of medical face masks, and distributing H1N1 virus vaccines at the health center if available, said Morgenthaler.

An H1N1 virus vaccine is in production and may be ready for distribution to the public in the fall, according to the CDC Web site.

Protein Sciences Corp. in Meriden is producing PanBlok, the pandemic version of the seasonal influenza vaccine, FluBlok. PanBlok can be used to prevent the H1N1 virus. The vaccine is "very close to FDA approval," and clinical trials are ongoing in Australia and will begin in the United States "fairly soon," said Daniel Adams, president and CEO of Protein Sciences Corp. The Food and Drug Administration has the authority to administer the vaccine before approval in emergency circumstances, he said.

"We'll be the first ones to make an H1N1 vaccine," he added.

The DPH is working on a vaccination plan and campaign, said Gerrish, and local health departments and school boards are also preparing for both an H1N1 virus vaccine and the conventional flu season. The QVHD is discussing and planning campaigns should the vaccine become available, said Balch. The Milford Health Department has considered offering the vaccine along with the seasonal flu vaccine at school sites, said McBride.

The New Haven Health Department has increased its seasonal flu vaccine order this year, said Rubano. A letter to parents and guardians included in orientation packets notes that the New Haven Health Department is working with the CDC and the DPH on an H1N1 virus vaccination program.

"I can't predict how many people would take (the H1N1 virus vaccine) at its first offering, but we're hoping that a good percentage does it," said Rubano. "Even if it's not 100 percent (of the population), any type of protection out there will definitely slow down the transmissibility of the virus."

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