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Meriden gets swine flu vaccine distribution grant

By: Amanda Falcone , Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN - When it comes to preparing for the H1N1, or swine flu, vaccine, the city will be getting up to \$26,000 to help distribute it.

The City Council authorized Beth Vumbaco, the city's director of public health and human services, to accept a grant from the state Department of Public Health Monday. The state received federal funds from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention for H1N1 vaccination planning and is passing the money along to the state's 42 mass dispensing areas, including Meriden.

The areas were established after Sept. 11, 2001.

The grant is for the city to develop a plan in collaboration with community partners and agencies to vaccinate priority populations, something Vumbaco said is not an easy task - even with the financial help. The uncertainty of the vaccine is problematic.

"The planning is changing on the daily basis," she said.

As of Tuesday, Vumbaco said mass dispensing areas did not know how many doses would be available this fall or what the side effects would be.

These are important details and ones that could drastically change the way the dispensing areas plan for the vaccine, Vumbaco said.

Among the several companies working to fast track a H1N1 vaccine is Meriden-based Protein Sciences Corp., which landed in June a \$35 million contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop a new way to make influenza vaccines. The company is working on its H1N1 vaccine, Pan Blok, and another influenza vaccine, Flu Blok, which is expected to receive Food and Drug Administration approval in September.

A representative from Protein Sciences could not be reached Tuesday for comment.

To get the most up-to-date information, Vumbaco said she, like other health directors, is keeping in touch with the public health department through weekly phone calls.

She is expecting that a small amount of the vaccine will be available in mid-October for those who have the highest risk of getting H1N1. Pregnant women and infants under 6 months old are top priority, Vumbaco said, adding that health care and emergency medical workers, children between six months and 4 years old and children younger than 19 who have high risk medical conditions are also considered part of the priority population.

In a recent prepared statement, Gov. M. Jodi Rell announced that H1N1 vaccinations will be free to the public. She also said that the state is recruiting doctors and other health care providers to administer the vaccine as soon as the federal government makes it available. Connecticut could initially receive up to 1.8 million doses, Rell said.

Connecticut has had more than 1,900 confirmed swine flu cases. Nine people, all of whom had underlying medical conditions, have died from the virus.

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