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Statement from Department of Health and Senior Services Commissioner Heather Howard on H1N1 Influenza

New Jersey continues to maintain open lines of communication with the public to ensure they have access to the most recent information on H1N1 influenza. There are a number of tools that New Jerseyans can use to stay informed, and simple everyday actions we can take to stay healthy.

New Jersey opened an H1N1 Information Hotline - 1-866-321-9571 earlier this month. Because of increased interest, call center hours will be extended to weekends. This toll-free public hotline will now be accessible seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call center operators will be able to provide general information about H1N1, vaccine safety and availability information, symptoms of H1N1 and flu preventive measures. Since opening the hotline, the Department has answered more than 7,730 calls from the public.

New Jersey's flu activity has moved from regional to widespread. This means that H1N1 flu is present in a majority of counties throughout the state. While any type of flu is cause for concern, it is not cause for alarm. I urge all residents to stay informed and take simple preventive measures to stay healthy.

I also want to take this opportunity to provide an update on vaccine production and availability, vaccine safety, and H1N1 target populations.

New Jersey's H1N1 Public Information Initiative

In an effort to provide critical information to the public, New Jersey created a Find a Flu Shot Locator, an H1N1 Resource Center website, and a toll-free hotline. These resources will help ensure residents and health care providers have access to information and can obtain accurate responses to their questions.

The State established an H1N1 Resource Center website that includes important information and timely updates on H1N1 flu in New Jersey. The website can be found at www.nj.gov/health. Additional information on H1N1 flu is available at the federal website, www.flu.gov.

The Find a Flu Shot Locator can be accessed at www.nj.gov/health. Residents can find where H1N1 flu clinics are being held throughout the State. Not all clinics are included on this list because some are being offered to very specific target populations, such as school-based efforts and private doctors' offices. Public flu clinics will be posted on this site as soon as they are scheduled. Additional public health clinics will be scheduled as more vaccine arrives.

H1N1 Vaccine Production and Availability

Many residents are concerned with the slower than expected arrival of H1N1 vaccine. Please understand that the H1N1 vaccine, like other vaccines, is produced by manufacturers and distributed by the federal government. We will do all that we can to ensure orders are placed in a timely manner and that the vaccine is getting to the target populations.

As of October 28, 2009, New Jersey ordered approximately 1.3 million doses of vaccine and more than 567,000 doses have been distributed to nearly 891 providers statewide. Shipments of the H1N1 vaccine will continue to arrive throughout this month and into the winter.

The federal government has assured us that ultimately there will be enough vaccine for everyone who wants it. However, with only limited vaccine available at this time, it is important to first target the individuals most susceptible to H1N1 flu.

H1N1 Target Populations

It is recommended that certain target groups be among the first to receive the H1N1 vaccine as it becomes available. These groups include:

- Pregnant women
- Household contacts and caregivers for children younger than 6 months of age
- Healthcare and emergency medical services personnel
- All people from 6 months through 24 years of age
- Persons aged 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza

H1N1 Vaccine is Safe

Many parents have raised concerns about the safety of the new H1N1 vaccine. All vaccines, including the H1N1 vaccine, are held to the highest standard of safety and are continually monitored. Each year, millions of Americans safely receive seasonal flu vaccines. The H1N1 vaccine is made the same way as seasonal flu vaccine by the same manufacturers that make seasonal flu vaccine. In addition, the National Institute of Health (NIH) has conducted clinical trials for the H1N1 vaccine. The vaccine has been tested and safely used in children, pregnant woman, and adults.