

A Look Back at H1N1 Vaccine Distribution in Lake County

By Kitty Loewy

In the early spring of 2009, no one knew how serious the H1N1 influenza outbreak was going to be. But, well before H1N1 was discovered in Mexico, the Lake County Health Department/Community Health Center had plans in place to prepare for and respond to a pandemic.

“As the 2009 H1N1 influenza began to infect Lake County residents, and the World Health Organization declared a pandemic, the Department mobilized its internal staff along with partner agencies to protect the health of the most vulnerable in the county,” said Irene Pierce, the Health Department’s Executive Director.

The Department determined that almost 300,000 out of the more than 700,000 residents of Lake County were in high risk groups determined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as needing the vaccine as soon as possible. These groups included:

- Persons 6 months to 24 years of age
- Caretakers and household contacts of children under 6 months of age
- Pregnant women
- Healthcare and emergency medical services employees
- People 25 to 64 years of age with underlying medical conditions, such as asthma or diabetes, which put them at high risk for flu-related complications

Initially, before vaccine was available, the Department moved forward with a communications campaign to disseminate key prevention messages to the public such as frequent hand washing, covering coughs and staying home when sick. Department staff also worked with a number of Lake County schools to prepare teachers, administrators and parents for the possibility of a large disease outbreak.

Finally, in late October, with a small supply of vaccine available (100,000 doses had been requested), the department began immunizing high risk groups at five walk-in clinics in Gurnee, Waukegan, Round Lake Beach, Mundelein and North Chicago.

The Department was expecting to be one of many providers distributing the vaccine, but due to the delay in the manufacturing of the vaccine and the subsequent shortage, it was the only supplier at that time. At the walk-in clinics, the Department was able to immunize approximately 10,000 people, more than it normally vaccinates in an entire flu season.

As more vaccine became available, additional appointment-only clinics were added in Highland Park, Vernon Hills, Lake Villa, Lindenhurst, Wauconda and other communities. Vaccine was given to several schools, including schools in Lincolnshire and Barrington, which held their own clinics. Simultaneously, the Department provided vaccine on an ongoing basis to patients at its community health centers in Waukegan, Zion, North Chicago, Highland Park and Round Lake Beach.

In addition to clinics, vaccine was distributed to over 430 healthcare providers, hospitals, first responders, retail businesses and others. "Community partnerships were seen as key to getting

the limited supply of the vaccine to high risk populations as quickly as possible. Public health efforts have helped protect numerous Lake County residents against this illness. Overall, there is little doubt that this pandemic and this response have strengthened the public health system in this county and country,” Pierce added.

Lake County manufacturer Maclean-Fogg has enjoyed a long standing relationship with the Department, having utilized the Department to educate employees on nutrition, weight control and smoking cessation. The automotive parts company was one of the many recipients of vaccine provided by the Department. Twenty percent of its Mundelein and Richmond workforce was immunized at in-house clinics, according to company Wellness Coordinator, Anne Marie Mitchell, R.N., BSN.

“We have a fantastic relationship with the Health Department,” Ms Mitchell said. “Lake County is always helpful and they did a great job of keeping us informed about the availability of the vaccine and when it was going to be shipped.”

By January, the Department had distributed most of its 100,000 doses, and had received additional shipments as the CDC opened the vaccine to anyone who wanted to receive it in addition to the target groups.

“We are very appreciative of our numerous community partners, such as schools, senior centers, park districts, hospitals, and to the numerous healthcare providers, who worked with us to

distribute the vaccine,” said Pierce. “Getting the vaccine out to Lake County residents in a timely fashion would not have been possible without them.”