

## **County Response to Swine Flu Effective and Appropriate**

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After a period during which stories of the *swine flu*, or more accurately the swine-origin influenza A (H1N1), outbreak dominated newspaper headlines and led on every radio and television newscast, the fervor caused by this new viral strain has subsided. Now that coverage of it is relegated to page five or is otherwise lost in most newscasts, the time is right to reflect on and assess the Oneida County Health Department's response to what was initially feared to be the next pandemic.

The origins of the H1N1 influenza are not clear. It seems to have first surfaced in Mexico and then spread fairly quickly to more than six hundred people in 44 U.S. states. It has since spread to 21 countries. Fatalities attributed to the virus have fortunately been few with only four deaths reported in this country; a 22-month Mexican child who was visiting in Texas, a 30-year school teacher who authorities confirm had serious underlying medical conditions, a Washington State man in his mid-thirties whose autopsy revealed had a previously undiagnosed heart condition and most recently an Arizona woman who had suffered from a severe lung disease prior to contracting the virus. Overall, persons infected with H1N1 required hospitalization in about 3 percent of the cases which is slightly higher than a seasonal flu. This particular strain of influenza is a combination of human, swine and avian flu strains. As the virus has spread around the country and globally, few hospitalizations and even fewer deaths have led many experts to question whether this particular strain of influenza is any more virulent, or poses any greater threat to public health than seasonal flu.

Nonetheless, since the outset, the virus met the criteria for a 'pandemic.' This particular viral strain was previously unknown. It appeared to be easily transmitted from human to human, and it demonstrated the capacity to cause death. Subsequently the World Health Organization raised the alert level to the fast spreading virus to the second highest level on April 29<sup>th</sup> and warned a "pandemic is imminent."

Two days earlier, the Oneida County Health Department had convened its *Public Health Incident Command System* assigning each member of the team specific duties and responsibilities during this 'health crisis.' Communications were established with all area hospitals and conference calls were scheduled regularly with them as well as with the New York State Department of Health and other community stakeholders.

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Area school districts were advised as to the status of the threat and the steps that should be taken to prevent the spread of infection should influenza surface in their schools. The media was kept informed through press releases and daily media updates.

The health department produced a recorded public service announcement which was distributed to all area radio stations. In order to allay fears that might be prompted by sensational coverage, its message was that while it was okay to be concerned, it was not necessary to be alarmed by news concerning the *swine flu*. Residents were reminded that the best way to protect yourself in lieu of an effective vaccine was by following some common sense practices including frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, staying home from work or school when sick, and avoiding others exhibiting symptoms of a flu-like illness. Under the direction of County Executive Anthony J. Picente, Jr., the Oneida County Health Department conducted a survey among area retailers to determine the availability of both adult and pediatric doses of prescription antiviral drugs proven to be effective in lessening the severity of symptoms and shortening the duration of H1N1. In addition, the Oneida County Health Department secured a quantity of these anti-viral drugs from the National Strategic Stockpile for our use should the need arise.

As doctors began seeing patients with flu-like symptoms, nasal-pharyngeal samples were taken from those who seemed most likely infected with H1N1. The Oneida County Health Department closely monitored these cases while testing was conducted at the New York State Wadsworth Laboratory. To date, none of the samples submitted have tested positive for the H1N1 virus, despite the patients' symptoms and recent travel history to areas that have experienced *swine flu* outbreaks. We will continue to monitor the situation and remain vigilant should this strain of influenza re-emerge. At the same time, we continue to hone our skills at effectively dealing with health emergencies.

To those who might suggest that all this has simply been an overreaction to a minor health issue, I would point out the potential threat any new virus poses to a population that has no immunity. I would remind them that 36-thousand people die every year from complications of seasonal influenza; and perhaps most importantly, I would ask them to recognize how serious we in public health take our mission; *'To Promote and Protect the Health of the citizens of and visitors to Oneida County.'*

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*\* Since this article was written, Oneida County has reported 5 confirmed cases of novel H1N1 influenza, or swine flu as it's more commonly known. Of those, four cases were resolved with the patient(s) fully recovering.*

*The 5<sup>th</sup>, and most recently reported case, tragically resulted in the death of an adolescent residing in Oneida County and being treated at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. This patient reportedly had underlying, pre-existing medical condition(s) which may have contributed to the outcome.*

*The Oneida County Health Department continues to caution residents that while it's fitting to be concerned, there is no cause for alarm and reminds everyone of the steps they can take to reduce the risk of influenza including:*

- **Frequent and thorough hand washing with soap and water. An alcohol-based hand cleaner can also be used***
- **Cover all coughs and sneezes with a tissue or forearm – never your hand***
- **Avoid persons with flu-like illness***
- **Stay home if you experience flu-like illness and remain home for at least 24 hours after symptoms disappear***
- **If you experience a cough and fever of 100 degrees or more consult your health care provider who may choose to prescribe an antiviral medication***

*Persons who are elderly, very young, have an underlying medical condition like asthma, heart disease, or diabetes or women who may be pregnant may be at higher risk for complications from influenza.*