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October 8, 2009

Dear Vermont Child Care Providers:

The 2009 H1N1 influenza A, first known as swine flu, is still in Vermont and the rest of the country. This new flu is circulating, along with the regular seasonal flu viruses, during this fall and winter season. Public health experts expect to see more illness from the new flu, with more outbreaks in schools and child care centers. However, the timing, spread and severity of influenza illness is still uncertain.

Because of our experience that began this spring, we know much more about this new flu virus than we did when it was first detected in April 2009. We know that the new flu virus especially affected children in schools, camps and other group settings. We also know that closing schools and child care settings to minimize exposure to the flu is not the best choice in most cases. Closing programs may have undesired consequences such as moving children to less supervised settings and placing parent employment at risk.

Following is a summary of new guidelines, updates and information to help us all *keep children safe*, and *keep children learning*:

Now is the time to plan for the new flu season.

New guidance for child care and early childhood programs is now available from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). This guidance was designed – in consultation with public health and education officials nationwide – to promote a safer environment for children and staff and reduce exposure to influenza. Our shared goal is to keep child care available, to slow the spread of the regular seasonal flu and the new H1N1 flu, and to limit the disruption of day-to-day activities and learning.

If you haven't done so already, now is the time to organize planning teams that include staff, parents and other providers. The complete new guidance, along with a communication toolkit that is ready now for child care providers to individualize, is available at www.flu.gov and www.healthvermont.gov.

Continue to emphasize the actions everyone can take to keep illness from spreading:

- Cover your nose and mouth every time you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue and discard after use, or cough into the crook of your elbow.
- Wash hands often and well, using soap and water, for as long as it takes to sing the “ABC” song. Soap and water is the first choice, but if soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.



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- Make it clear that you expect anyone who is sick to stay home – or be sent home. For now, anyone who is sick with flu-like illness should stay home and away from others *for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone*, without using fever-reducing medicines like acetaminophen or ibuprofen (remember that children should not be given aspirin for fever). The guidance for staying home is for everyone: administrators, teachers, staff, children, parents and visitors.
- Reinforce this information with announcements, lessons, postings throughout the child care setting, and send reminders home. Posters and resources are included in the child care communication toolkit and at www.healthvermont.gov.
- Re-think actions, physical layouts, etc. that do not support good health habits. Allow time for hand washing and keep supplies available and convenient. Do your best to separate sick children and staff that are waiting to go home, while maintaining appropriate supervision.
- Help families identify children who are at high risk for flu complications and could benefit from early evaluation by their physician if they develop the flu.
- Encourage everyone to get vaccinated against the regular, seasonal flu as soon as vaccine is available.

Review plans and procedures for dismissing child care – just in case.

Recommendations in the new guidance for child care providers are based on the extent and severity of illness in the community. While the severity of illness is still similar to that of the spring and summer, providers should plan to stay open if they can maintain appropriate child-to-staff ratios. We ask you to continue to take steps to slow transmission in the child care setting. However, we recognize that you may decide to close for a short time for logistical reasons – such as high numbers of staff absent – or for a longer time if the illness becomes more severe or extensive. We recommend that this decision be made in consultation with the Department of Health.

Programs that close will be asked to inform the Child Development Division of the Department for Children & Families so they can keep track of the impact of flu on child care. Please call (802) 241-3941, or toll free at (800) 649-2642 and speak with the licenser on duty.

Now is also the time to plan for continuity of care and how, as a child care provider, you can still be helpful to parents even if programs are closed. We recommend that you check with parents to make sure that emergency contact information is accurate and up to date. You may also help parents identify alternative care if the program must close.

A vaccine to protect children against the new flu will be ready this fall.

A safe and effective vaccine has been developed to protect against the 2009 H1N1 flu virus. Watch for announcements about the arrival of the vaccine in Vermont.

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Vaccinations will be offered first to those who are most at risk for serious illness and complications:

- Pregnant women
- Household contacts and caregivers of children under 6 months of age
- Health care workers and emergency medical services personnel
- Anyone 6 months through 24 years of age
- Anyone 25 through 64 years of age with health conditions associated with high risk of medical complications from influenza.

The Vermont Department of Health is working with pediatricians and family practice providers to offer vaccinations for young children, with the Department of Education and schools to offer school-based vaccination clinics, and with the Vermont Association of Home Health Agencies and other partners to offer public vaccination clinics around the state.

Please remember and share the fact that vaccination for this or any flu is voluntary, not mandatory.

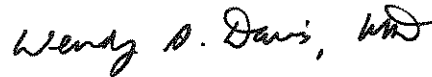
Stay tuned for more information.

We are committed to keeping you advised of new information and new recommendations as they become available. Please refer to www.healthvermont.gov and www.flu.gov for current public information and resources, or dial 2-1-1.

Sincerely,



Steve Dale
Commissioner
Department for Children and Families



Wendy Davis, MD
Commissioner
Department of Health