Leaders Urge Preparedness for Likely H1N1 Surge

BY HEIDI SPLETE

BETHESDA, MD. — President Obama joined other U.S. government and health leaders at a preparedness summit in urging Americans to plan now for a likely surge in cases of the novel influenza A(H1N1) this fall.

"We want to make sure that we are not promoting panic, but we are promoting vigilance and preparation," President Obama, who was in Italy, said by phone during the summit at the National Institutes of Health.

"Our goals are straightforward: to reduce illness and death and minimize social disruption," said Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Frieden, along with Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and Arne Duncan, secretary of the Department of Education, reviewed the status of the government's efforts to prepare for an anticipated surge in the volume of cases of the novel H1N1 flu in the fall.

Secretary Sebelius summarized the government's four-pronged strategy of surveillance, community mitigation, vaccination, and communication. She encouraged all Americans to visit the government's flu-specific Web site, flu.gov, which reinforces ways to prevent spreading the flu. In an effort to engage an Internet-savvy population in public health, the site offers visitors the opportunity to create a 60-second H1N1 video public service announcement. One of the announcements submitted will be chosen by the government for widespread distribution, she said, with a $2,500 prize going to the maker of the winning video, according to the site.

In addition, Secretary Sebelius outlined the government's intentions for minimizing the impact of H1N1. The H1N1 vaccine, if it is found to be safe and effective, will be purchased by the federal government, she said, and medical and scientific experts will help prioritize vaccination efforts and "get the shots in the arms of the people who need them most." A vaccine is currently being evaluated in clinical trials, and safety and effectiveness information should be available this month, she said. If the vaccine is found to be safe and effective, it should be available in limited amounts in October. Based on current evidence, likely high-risk groups that would be the first candidates for the H1N1 vaccine might include younger adults with comorbid conditions, children, and pregnant women.

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Federal grants for state health departments to help with preparedness are available, Secretary Sebelius also announced. She added that $90 million will be available for hospitals to help them prepare for the potential surge in flu-related activity.

The Department of Homeland Security is focusing on the importance of maintaining essential services if widespread illness contributes to widespread absenteeism, Secretary Napolitano said. She encouraged state and local leaders to host their own local flu preparedness summits.

Because the novel H1N1 virus has disproportionately affected children, it is important to "get clear guidance out early" to schools, said Secretary Duncan. School-closing decisions should be made at the local level, on a school-by-school basis, and only as a last resort, he said.

Secretary Napolitano said that even if the novel H1N1 flu is less severe than expected, the procedures being put in place will improve the public health system for future emergencies. It's possible the H1N1 virus won't be as bad as anticipated, Secretary Sebelius said, but it's wise to prepare for a worst-case scenario. ■

For the latest information on H1N1 preparedness, visit flu.gov.

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