



**Statement Submitted on Behalf**

Of

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with

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before the

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regarding

**H1N1 Influenza**

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Good morning, Chairpersons Gottfried, John, Nolan, Glick and Lancman. I am Dr. Issac Weisfuse, from the New York City Health Department. I am joined here today by Kathleen Grimm, Deputy Chancellor at the New York City Department of Education and Roger Platt, Assistant Commissioner, Office of School Health, also with the New York City Department of Education and the New York City Health Department. On behalf of Commissioner Farley and Chancellor Klein, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the City's work to protect the citizens of New York City against H1N1 influenza.

As the fall flu season approaches, the City is working intensively to prepare for a reemergence of H1N1 influenza. Like seasonal flu, H1N1 influenza is caused by a virus that infects the nose, throat and lungs. It causes fever and a cough or sore throat that can last a week or more. It can also cause headaches, body aches, chills and tiredness. In the spring, our best estimate is that between 750,000 and 1 million New Yorkers experienced influenza like illness, most of whom were sickened with the novel H1N1 strain of influenza. While H1N1 caused severe illness in some people, the vast majority recovered completely and without any medical treatment.

The Health Department uses a multi-tiered system to track influenza activity in New York City. The agency collects daily reports of influenza like illness from hospital emergency departments and monitors hospitals and clinics to determine which influenza viruses are circulating, assess the severity of illness, and identify populations at risk of complications. By posting daily and weekly updates on a new influenza portal – [www.nyc.gov/flu](http://www.nyc.gov/flu) – the City is ensuring all New Yorkers have access to the latest surveillance information.

Beyond encouraging improved personal hygiene, the Health Department is urging all New Yorkers to protect themselves from influenza by getting vaccinated. The H1N1 vaccine was produced in the same way as seasonal flu vaccines; the only difference is that this vaccine contains the specific proteins that help the immune system recognize and combat the H1N1 virus.

As the H1N1 vaccine becomes available, and in addition to a seasonal flu vaccination, we are encouraging all health care workers to receive the H1N1 vaccine, as well as people between the ages of 6 months and 24 years of age, people ages 25 through 64 years of age with an underlying health condition that increases risk of complications, and anyone who lives with or cares for children less than 6 months old.

Last week, about 68,000 doses of H1N1 vaccine arrived in the city. Thousands more will arrive this week and the Health Department anticipates that New York City will receive between 1.2 million doses and 2 million per month thereafter. The Health Department is developing a subway advertising campaign to ensure that people are aware of the benefits of vaccination, and the agency will soon launch an online locator at [www.nyc.gov/flu](http://www.nyc.gov/flu), which anyone can use to find a nearby source of H1N1 vaccine.

Neither the seasonal virus nor the H1N1 virus is expected to cause unusually severe illness, but the sheer volume of cases could strain hospital emergency departments as people with symptoms seek information, reassurance, and treatment. Hospital emergency departments

saw large increases in patient volume during the spring H1N1 outbreak. However, very few of these patients required hospital care, but sought care in emergency departments because they lacked other alternatives or were unaware such alternatives existed.

This fall, the Health Department is working to ensure that people with influenza-like illness know how to manage their symptoms, when to seek care, and where to find it. To avoid overburdening hospital emergency departments, the City is promoting a range of additional venues for influenza treatment. If necessary, some hospitals may expand their emergency departments into nearby areas to accommodate influenza patients if demand rises. The Health and Hospitals Corporation has designated some of its community-based primary-care clinics as "flu centers," where New Yorkers can get vaccination, information and outpatient care; and the City's network of 70 community health centers will provide outpatient care for people without health insurance.

The Health Department is encouraging employers to be familiar with simple measures to reduce the risk of infection and prepare for the impact of illness on their operations. One approach the Health Department is using to educate employers on H1N1 is through its new flu portal – [www.nyc.gov/flu](http://www.nyc.gov/flu). There, employers can find posters and brochures as well as the latest information on preventing the spread of H1N1 in the workplace. The portal also provides information on preventing H1N1 transmission in colleges and universities, congregate facilities, as well as guidance for health workers making home visits.

On October 28<sup>th</sup> and again on November 4<sup>th</sup>, the Health Department and the City's Office of Emergency Management are hosting forums for business owners and managers, emergency planners, operations and facilities management, human resources and occupational safety and health professionals. This forum will cover such topics as seasonal influenza and H1N1 basics, vaccinations, citywide preparations for influenza season, influenza transmission, influenza health and safety for the workplace and business continuity. Four half-day sessions will be offered.

To help parents prepare for the upcoming flu season, Commissioner Farley and Chancellor Klein sent a joint letter to parents during the first week of school describing simple steps that can be taken to control influenza, such as getting children vaccinated, keeping them home when they are sick, and teaching them the importance of washing hands and covering coughs. In addition to these steps, and based on our lessons learned from the spring, the City has established an open schools policy for the flu season which consists of three basic components:

**--Vaccination--** As vaccine for H1N1 influenza becomes available this fall the City will offer free, voluntary, H1N1 vaccination to school-aged students. In preparation for this fall's school-based H1N1 vaccination effort, the Health Department and the Department of Education piloted a week-long vaccination program in six New York City schools. Trained nurses administered the seasonal influenza vaccine to the approximately 700 students whose parents completed consent forms. The pilot program sought to verify the most efficient ways to immunize large numbers of children in school-based.

Within the next few weeks, parents of elementary school students will receive consent forms to sign if they want their children to receive the H1N1 vaccine at school. The actual vaccination

effort will start in early November and continue for approximately eight weeks. Both public and non-public schools will be included. In addition, the City will hold weekend vaccine clinics for middle- and high-school students in all five boroughs during November and December. Vaccines will not cost parents any money, and no child will be vaccinated without the consent of a parent or guardian

**--Monitoring--** From the start of the school year, school nurses have been using a city-wide database to report the number of students seen for influenza-like illness during the school day. Influenza-like illness, or “ILI,” is defined as fever with cough or sore throat. In a daily public report – posted online at [www.nyc.gov/flu](http://www.nyc.gov/flu) – the City lists all schools reporting five or more cases of influenza-like illness on the previous day. The daily school report will also show the previous day’s absentee rate for every public school, though it is important to understand that absenteeism is not by itself a measure of influenza activity.

**--Infection Control--** Each of the city’s 1,500 public schools started the year with an influenza-prevention campaign that includes signs, posters and classroom instruction on covering coughs and washing hands. Restrooms have been continuously stocked with soap and paper towels, and parents received written reminders to keep their children home when they are sick.

If a school nurse sees five or more cases of influenza-like illness in one day, the school will send a second letter to parents stressing the need to keep sick children home. If a school experiences excessive influenza activity – defined as four percent of the student body (at least 15 children) being seen by a school nurse for influenza-like illness on a single day – a doctor or supervising nurse will visit the school to assess the situation. Besides shoring up the school’s infection-control efforts, the health supervisor will determine whether the school has students whose health conditions place them at high risk of influenza complications. If a school has a high concentration of medically vulnerable children, the Health Department may recommend additional safety measures and may consider school closure as a last resort.

We can’t predict the flu season, but we can make sure that City government is prepared to protect the health of New Yorkers of all ages and in all settings. We will keep you informed of our plans as they further develop and look forward to working with you on this issue during the coming months.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify—we are happy to answer your questions.

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