



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
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To: District Superintendents
Superintendents of Public and Nonpublic Schools
Administrators of Charter Schools
Principals
Other Educators
Child Care Providers
After School Program Officials

From: John Auerbach, Commissioner of Public Health
Mitchell Chester, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Sherri Killins, Commissioner of Early Education and Care

Date: April 29, 2009

Re: **Possible school or child care closures as a result of swine influenza A**

As you are undoubtedly aware, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified numerous confirmed cases of swine influenza A (H1N1) in the U.S. and we have identified our first cases here in Massachusetts. Our three agencies have been working jointly to provide you with relevant guidance and materials to share with your institutions and their staff.

Recommended School or Child Care Closure Criteria

The federal CDC and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) have issued the following recommendations regarding the closure of schools or child care facilities if there is a confirmed case of swine influenza A (H1N1) in a school, child care, after school or similar setting:

- Temporary School Closures: Temporary closure of a school or child care facility should be strongly considered in schools or childcare facilities if a student at the school or facility has a **confirmed diagnosis of swine flu** or if the student has **influenza like symptoms and has been exposed to swine flu from a family member, friend or other person with a confirmed diagnosis.** *We are not recommending school or child care closure in situations where a child is ill, but*

does not have a confirmed diagnosis or link to someone with a confirmed diagnosis of swine flu.

- **Response to Dismissals:** If the school dismisses students or a childcare facility closes, they should also cancel all school or childcare-related gatherings and encourage parents and students to avoid congregating outside of the school.
- **Duration of Closing:** The duration of closings for school and childcare facilities should be for a time period to be determined based on ongoing epidemiological findings in their geographic area. School authorities and childcare facilities should consult with their local and state health departments for guidance on reopening. If no additional confirmed or suspected cases are identified among students (or school-based personnel) for a period of 7 days, schools may consider reopening.
- **Preparedness Planning: Schools and childcare facilities in unaffected areas should begin to prepare for the possibility of school dismissal or childcare facility closure. This includes asking teachers, parents, and officials in charge of critical school-associated programs (such as meal services) to make contingency plans.**
- **Other Interventions:** CDC and MDPH recommend the consideration of other interventions to control the spread of swine flu in settings where there are confirmed cases. Large gatherings linked to settings or institutions with confirmed cases should be cancelled. This might include a school event linked to a school with confirmed cases, such as a dance or graduation.
- **Additional Closings:** Local school and health authorities, in consultation with MDPH, may make decisions regarding additional temporary school closures or the cancellation of other large gatherings in the community based upon the extent of influenza like illness in the community.

School Closure Notification Process

MDPH is performing ongoing surveillance of all possible cases of swine flu. If there is a confirmed case or a suspect case linked to a confirmed case, MDPH will ensure that the school or child care authorities and the local public health authorities in the affected community are notified as soon as possible and will guide local authorities on temporary school closure decisions. The Departments of Early Education and Care or Elementary and Secondary Education will also provide guidance and support to the affected school or child care facility.

Disease Reporting and Consultation

School nurses, student health centers or other school or child care authorities should report higher than normal absenteeism to your local health department or to the DPH Epidemiology Division at 617-983-6800.

Communication with Parents and Staff

We have also prepared a sample letter to parents explaining the school/child care closure policy and including all of the recommendations for prevention of illness that DPH is sharing with the public. There are important messages that you can share with your institutions and their staff to help prevent getting or spreading any type of influenza:

1. **Become aware of the facts.** We encourage everyone to visit the CDC's new web site at www.cdc.gov/swineflu, which provides excellent guidance on avoiding influenza and on how to care for a sick person at home. Please check the DPH web site, www.mass.gov/dph, for updates. In addition, DPH has its own regularly updated blog at www.mass.gov/blog/publichealth.

2. **Practice good health hygiene.** Disease transmission can be significantly reduced by taking the following actions:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Practice good "cough etiquette" by coughing or sneezing into a tissue, or into your elbow instead of into your hands.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick, stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to avoid infecting them.

This is an evolving situation and recommendations may change as more information becomes available. Our agencies will continue to provide guidance as the situation changes. Thanks in advance for your patience and for your help in spreading the message about the importance of prevention.

Enclosures:

Swine Influenza A (H1N1) Virus Information for School and Childcare Settings