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News Release

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With Pandemic H1N1 on the Rise, Public Health Stresses Importance of Prevention & Vaccination

Salt Lake City, UT – New statewide data released today by the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) indicate a substantial increase in the spread of the pandemic H1N1 virus throughout the state. Public health officials want Utahns to know there are specific actions they should take to protect against the flu.

The best protection comes in the form of the pandemic H1N1 vaccination. However, vaccine supplies are still very limited, and are being made available initially only to certain Utahns at most risk of influenza and serious complications of influenza. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has licensed four manufacturers to produce the vaccine – and each manufacturer produces vaccine that is only approved for use in certain age groups. Each of the state’s 12 local health departments is working within manufacturer parameters to target the initial, limited amount of vaccine to the people in their jurisdictions who stand to benefit most from receiving a vaccine.

“We know certain populations, such as infants and toddlers, are at a much higher risk of becoming severely ill if they are infected with the pandemic H1N1 virus,” said Salt Lake Valley Health Department Executive Director Gary Edwards. “It makes the most sense for us to vaccinate those who are high risk first. We hope the public will be patient, understanding that over the next few weeks we should have enough vaccine to start immunizing everyone who falls into a priority group.”

The UDOH’s weekly release of influenza data suggests the spread of pandemic H1N1 virus is accelerating throughout the state. Utah’s rate of influenza-like illness (ILI), a key indicator in determining how widely the virus is circulating, shows the state is above the “outbreak” level for the second consecutive week. Disease severity, which is measured by influenza-associated hospitalizations and deaths does not appear to have changed, but because more people are becoming ill with pandemic H1N1 influenza, more are developing severe disease. Since the

beginning of September, 127 Utahns have been hospitalized and three have died from H1N1-associated causes.

“If you think of an outbreak occurring on a bell-shaped curve, we appear to be at the base of what could be a steep climb to the peak,” said UDOH Deputy State Epidemiologist Dr. Rachel Herlihy. “With vaccine in short supply, it’s critical people start taking proactive steps to protect themselves and their families against the disease. It is especially important that people stay home when they are sick with influenza symptoms.”

Simple, everyday preventive actions will help limit the spread of germs that cause influenza, such actions include:

- Coughing or sneezing into a tissue or your shirt sleeve;
- Avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth – germs spread this way;
- Avoiding close contact with sick people;
- Staying home from work or school when you are sick with influenza-like illness for at least 24 hours after your fever has broken and;
- Washing your hands regularly, especially after sneezing or coughing, using soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

Families should prepare for what they would need if they are required to spend time isolated at home due to illness. Items like food, water, tissue, sanitizers, over-the-counter medications and prescription medications are all useful items to have on hand in the event you become ill and are confined to your home. Having these items in the home will also help to ensure sick people don’t need to go out into public to buy them.

Businesses should also consider how they would cope with increased absenteeism due to potentially high rates of illness among their employees or their employee’s children. Having flexible leave policies or telecommuting policies will help protect healthy workers and will contribute to the health of the business as well.

More information on steps for preventing influenza can be found at www.health.utah.gov/h1n1. To find out where to get either an H1N1 or seasonal influenza vaccine, Utahns can visit www.immunize-utah.org or call 2-1-1.

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public’s health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.