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October 14, 2009

Dear Los Angeles County School Administrators:

The purpose of this letter is to explain the policy of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) in releasing health information to the public, as well as to correct some common misunderstandings around pandemic H1N1 flu.

Given the media's continued interest in the effect of pandemic H1N1 flu on schools, we want to remind you that Public Health does not release information about school flu outbreak and/or case investigations to the public or to media outlets. A cornerstone in our mission to protect the health of our county's residents is to honor and maintain the confidentiality of all of our investigations and disease reports.

Only in rare cases will Public Health release information that identifies the location of an outbreak. For instance, this might occur when a hepatitis outbreak is associated with a restaurant. This is done when we cannot identify everyone that might have been exposed and we need these individuals to seek medical care for treatment. But for influenza, we do not release information that reveals the location of suspected disease outbreaks or can be used to identify suspected cases – and we urge you as school administrators to do the same.

There are many reasons why it is essential to maintain the confidentiality of our investigations, especially during our efforts to monitor and manage the current pandemic H1N1 influenza situation. Sharing information on influenza school outbreaks and investigations can have the following negative consequences:

- It falsely implies that certain locations are more hazardous to your health. Currently, flu is prevalent across the nation. Sharing information on a school investigation falsely implies that a particular school (or schools in general) is riskier than other locations. Instead, it is important to focus on the fact that healthy habits (washing hands, covering coughs, staying home when sick, getting vaccinated) should be enacted always and everywhere.

- It implies that the identified school has poor infection control practices. Single cases of flu, even flu outbreaks, are common, especially among school-aged children. Even a school that is diligent in promoting healthy habits can experience a flu outbreak - particularly this season when pandemic H1N1 flu will likely have an increased impact on our communities.
- It inhibits reporting. When a school or other location is singled out, it makes others less inclined to report. Maintaining the confidentiality of our investigations is essential to encouraging reporting so Public Health can help protect the health of our residents.

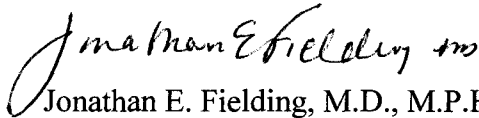
Correcting Some Common Misunderstandings:

- Medical clearance is NOT needed for students and staff to return following resolution of flu-like illness. Anyone who is sick with flu-like symptoms can return to work or school 24 hours after fever subsides, as long as medicines are not being used to reduce fever. We understand that many schools and school districts want to be as conservative as possible when dealing with this highly charged subject. However, a doctor's note for readmission is not medically necessary and in fact creates an additional burden and cost on our health care system by adding unnecessary visits.
- There is no need to notify Public Health to report single cases of flu. Flu is, and will continue to be, very prevalent this fall. We can expect *all* schools to experience at least one case of flu. Instead of reporting individual cases, we urge schools to monitor and report clusters of illness. More information on reporting illness can be found on our schools webpage (www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/schools).
- Testing and medical treatment is not necessary for the majority of cases. Most people with flu-like illness will get better without the need to see a doctor or receive special treatment. Pandemic H1N1 flu is treated the same way that seasonal flu is – with lots of fluids and plenty of rest away from work or school. We urge people, especially during the flu season, to keep our medical centers, ERs and hospitals free to treat those who are seriously ill.
- Certain people should take extra care if they become sick with flu. Some people are more likely to get very ill if they become sick with flu. This includes: pregnant women, infants and children aged 4 and younger, people with poor immune systems, and those with chronic illness, especially those with heart or respiratory issues. These individuals should call their doctor right away if they experience flu-like symptoms.

- To date, LACDPH has NOT recommended closure of a school due to pandemic H1N1 flu. The decision to close a school or cancel classes or other activities is made on a *case by case basis*. This decision would be made following careful consideration of the circumstances and only following consultation with the school administrators. Public Health must carefully consider several factors when deciding to close a school including: severity of illness; onset of illness at the school; level of illness (number of students out sick); and, unique issues specific to each school.

As a reminder, Public Health has many great resources to help educate your campus community about flu and how to improve healthy habits that are available on our website (www.publichealth.lacounty.gov). For additional questions on pandemic H1N1 flu please feel free to contact the Los Angeles County helpline at 2-1-1.

Sincerely,



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Director and Health Officer

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