H1N1 Prevention at The City University of New York

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The City University of New York (CUNY) is the largest urban public university in the United States. Its 23 institutions—all of which are located within New York City’s five boroughs—include 11 senior colleges, six community colleges, and six graduate and professional schools. CUNY has more than 260,000 degree seeking students and 38,000 employees. The primary concern regarding H1N1 is to protect the members of the CUNY community and their families. To that end, CUNY has developed an approach that has three key elements: coordination, preparation, and communication.

Coordination
CUNY acknowledges the leadership role of the New York State Department of Health and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in assessing health risks and setting health policy. There are many sources of information and guidance on H1N1, but because all CUNY campuses are in New York City, it follows the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s lead most directly in pursuing a consistent and coordinated program to minimize the spread of influenza.

As a result, CUNY coordinates its efforts most closely with the health department, which in turn works with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other research institutions to obtain, evaluate, and share evolving epidemiological data. CUNY is also part of the city-wide coordination effort that includes the mayor’s office, the Office of Emergency Management, the Health and Hospitals Corporation, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, the Department of Education, and other agencies that participate actively in regular conference calls, meetings, and training sessions.

CUNY accesses a number of other valuable sources of information, as well. There are state agencies, such as the New York State Department of Health and the State Education Department; higher education associations, such as the University Risk Management and Insurance Association (URMIA) and the Campus Safety Health and Environmental Management Association (CSHEMA); and other New York colleges, including SUNY and a number of private universities. With information rapidly changing, it is imperative to stay informed.

As an illustration, during last spring’s H1N1 outbreak, CUNY participated in daily conference calls with the Health Department and the Office of Emergency Management to obtain up-to-date surveillance and monitoring data and to discuss infection-control strategy. Through daily internal conference calls, this information was then shared with the CUNY community.

Preparation
CUNY has been fortunate that it has experienced no significant H1N1 outbreak, but it continues to prepare for any contingency and thereby minimize future risks. A key component of these efforts is the Influenza Response Plan, a dynamic preparedness tool that offers university-wide, campus-specific, and departmental guidance. Originally developed for the avian flu in 2006, the plan incorporates pandemic flu plans developed by other colleges and universities and information from various government sources and higher education associations. It provides for incremental levels of response depending on the influenza’s severity
and spread. It is regularly reviewed by CUNY’s Risk Management Council and campus stakeholder committees, and it serves as the strategic plan for combating the spread of H1N1.

In addition to the Influenza Response Plan, CUNY has also finalized and disseminated a Protocol on Infectious Disease Notification to facilitate the reporting of communicable diseases. The protocol, which is designed to support the efforts of the Health Department, went through a thorough review process, incorporating comments from various internal groups, including employee unions.

The university has also taken steps to foster a culture of infection control throughout the university. "Cover Your Cough" and hand-washing posters hang throughout CUNY’s approximately 300 buildings—and they are checked regularly to confirm that they stay posted. CUNY has also asked the campuses to make sure that there is ample soap in the restrooms, to clean more often and more carefully, to place hand sanitizers in many high-traffic areas, and to encourage everyone in the CUNY community to stay home if they are sick and to stay there until they have been fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication.

**Communication**
An effective flu prevention program depends on effective communication. To implement the H1N1 program, CUNY tries to deliver a uniform message throughout the university. This includes briefings and updates for campus presidents, senior executives, union leaders, and key managers to ensure that they understand the scope and importance of CUNY’s H1N1 preparedness efforts.

For the wider CUNY community, flu information is shared through e-mail and web-based updates. In fact, for the foreseeable future, CUNY maintains a permanent H1N1 "hot button" on the CUNY home page that provides the latest H1N1 updates and links to the CUNY Flu Page, which consolidates current information from a wide variety of external sources and links to many helpful H1N1 websites. Additionally, campus websites maintain up-to-date flu information in prominent positions on their home pages, and they all link to the CUNY Flu Page as well. The flu page minimizes the potential for confusion and ensures that there is a consistent message throughout the university. Because our campus websites link to it and the CUNY community relies on it for critical information, such as where to obtain flu vaccines and how to access posters and flyers, the site must remain comprehensive and up-to-date.

While the web provides broad-based access, there is still no substitute for personal communication. The campuses are visited regularly; spot checks are conducted to make sure that all H1N1 prevention commitments are met; executives, administrators, and line managers are briefed personally; and an H1N1 update is part of each meeting of the Risk Management Council, the Environmental Health and Safety Council, the Business Continuity Committee, the Emergency Preparedness Task Force, and the equivalent campus meetings.

Beyond that, CUNY tries to coordinate with those who have hands-on responsibility for implementation: environmental health and safety officers, student affairs leaders, health and wellness centers, risk managers, employee unions, and anyone else that can be instrumental in flu prevention. Influenza doesn’t respect organizational boundaries, so we have to make sure that we are all in sync.

In conclusion, preventing the spread of influenza at CUNY is a shared commitment and one that we have taken very seriously. Hopefully, H1N1 in New York City will continue to be mild and limited, but for those responsible for the well-being of the CUNY community, effective coordination, preparation, and communication remain the order of the day.

*Portions of this article were delivered as testimony by the author and by Allan Dobrin, CUNY’s Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, before the New York State Legislature.*