

11-20-09 Harried Help for H1N1

We gave it our best shot, no pun intended, and it was still a harried affair. However, we did not run out of vaccine and we did not have to tell families who had waited in line that we were all done. (Well, there was one family denied the vaccine but I'll explain that.) Halifax, MA had their first H1N1 clinic on Friday, November 13, 2009 and despite the attention to detail and the herculean effort required to pull it off, there was still so much to learn. That's OK. Improvement is a good thing.

We should have been at the school gymnasium using our emergency dispensing site plans but the plans for this first clinic started off with only 100 doses. By the time the plans were made, 200 more doses arrived and our contracted public health nurses provided another 80 or so doses. Imagine making 380 appointments, involving screening conversations with every single one and then imagine all those children and their parents in line with quarter-hour time slots per small group. Then imagine those groups being allowed upstairs to the clinic room, as spaced allowed. Papers had to be filled out and questions answered.

The noise became deafening. Babies were crying. A couple children held on to doorways with all their might, begging parents to spare them this shot. The line was painfully slow.

That's one visual. Another might not be noticed or appreciated by the general public.

When we go to a doctor's office, I think it is reasonable to assume order and timely appointments, barring unforeseen emergencies for the doctor that day. Your local board of health is not a doctor's office and it is unpredictable how long it will take for immunizing infants and children. Some received the nasal mist and that went pretty quickly. Others received injections and sometimes a mother was there on her own with several children.

Allowing all of these somewhat predictable but previously unexperienced factors to unfold and succeed were many helping hands.

CERT was there to check names and appointments, check residency ID's, steer people to the correct paperwork and find someone who could answer their questions.

The Police Department provided an officer for the parking lot and to be present in and around the clinic.

The custodial staff set up the tables and chairs and even improvised when I wanted the portable half walls (generously provided by the school) to be longer, by adding a wooden pole in between the two and draping sheets over the pole.

A town hall employee donated a box of gloves (and it was needed!) and sat by the exit door to make sure people did not enter there.

Walmart donated stickers, sharps containers and a DVD player so that children's movies and cartoons could play for the waiting youngsters. I forgot to bring movies from home, so the Holmes Public Library jumped to my rescue with movies, holding me responsible for them, of course! That's just one teeny tiny example of all the tracking and accountability necessitated by these circumstances. Imagine also documenting the paper and toner, the fridge, the nurses, the gloves, the sanitizer, the overtime hours of my one wonderful assistant and you might begin to picture the scene behind the flu clinics.

Volunteer licensed nurses were also on hand to vaccinate, assist with queries and hold children. I could not have had this clinic without their help.

Unfortunately, it was not until after the clinic that I discovered that my volunteer nurses were not “allowed” to vaccinate by the contracted public health nurses. That is why the line was so slow. That issue will be addressed. Our public health nurses work for us. It is not up to them to tell us who can and cannot immunize with vaccine ordered and received by the Board of Health. You can look forward to that improvement at the next clinic.

Still curious about the one family turned away? We could not vaccinate their young children because they wanted the second “booster” shot and we had no evidence of the date of the first. I cannot ask nurses to put their license on the line by providing a shot in less time than is required. In this case, the requirement is for 28 days to pass for all those children under ten years old needing two doses. We were able to make arrangements for the family the following week. All’s well that ends well, especially in trying times.

Sadly, many families could not make the clinic, calling in to cancel their appointment because their children were now sick with “flu like symptoms”. This disease is spreading very rapidly. It breaks my heart that I could not prevent it. Add these parents who called in to cancel to my long list of owed expressions of thanks and gratitude.

Teamwork and cooperation bring a community together and save a community, too. Think of this when you sit around your turkey dinner next week.

The day after the clinic, I was at the supermarket and while at the checkout, a friend asked how the clinic went. My face was flushed and apologetic, as I was about to list the weaknesses and my wish list for improvements. As I was about to begin those apologies, the teenage boy at the register interrupted me by saying, “It was great! I got my vaccine yesterday and I’m glad I was able to!” I smiled. He made my day!

Add gratitude itself to my list of things to be thankful for.

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