

Napolitano: 'Big Influx' of new infections likely

SEPTEMBER 2 2009

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said Wednesday that people should expect "a big influx" of swine flu cases this fall and prepare as best they can.

"The best thing we all can do are the very simple things, the washing of the hands, the coughing into the sleeve," Napolitano said in a nationally broadcast interview. " ... We're in all likelihood going to have them (new infections) before the vaccine is available."

Napolitano was among a host of Cabinet officers who briefed President Barack Obama Tuesday on the federal government's preparations and planning for the fall. Another of those Cabinet members, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, said in a separate interview that it's critically important to keep schools open and education uninterrupted.

"We got a little bit lucky" in the last school year, he said, because the H1N1 didn't surface until very near the end of the academic year.

"We're not going to be so lucky this year," Duncan added, "so the more we're prepared, the more we're talking ... the better we're going to be able to handle this as a country, the more we're going to be able to keep our schools open."

There have been over 550 deaths in the United States from H1N1 and a scientific advisory panel recently sent the White House a report saying it was possible that anywhere from 30 percent to half the population could catch what doctors call "2009 H1N1" and that it was also possible there could be between 30,000 and 90,000 deaths.

"Everything we've seen in the U.S. and everything we've seen around the world suggests we won't see that kind of number if the virus doesn't change," Dr. Thomas Frieden, head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said in a C-SPAN interview last week.

In her interview Wednesday on NBC's "Today" show, Napolitano was asked why the government isn't requiring all Americans to get the swine flu vaccine, once it's available. "Because health programs generally aren't mandatory, and you get pushback to that," she replied.

She also reiterated statements that administration officials had made earlier, saying the initial supplies of vaccine should go to people most susceptible to the virus like young children, pregnant women and people with certain health problems such as asthma.

Napolitano noted that Congress has appropriated billions of dollars to buy vaccine supplies and said she believed more money could be approved if necessary. "This is a changing environment," she said. "We'll have to deal with it day by day."

Asked if her Homeland Security Department was moving toward prohibiting sick people from boarding commercial aircraft, she said that decision would be left to the individual airlines.

Duncan, appearing on ABC's "Good Morning America," said federal officials want to make sure that every young person between 5-24 get the vaccine, free of charge.

He praised efforts by states and localities to get ready for new infections, saying planning is going forward. "What you're seeing around the country is an outbreak of common sense," Duncan said.

Obama on Tuesday urged Americans to take steps to prevent infection. "I don't want anybody to be alarmed, but I do want everyone to be prepared," the president said after getting a briefing on swine flu preparedness.

Vaccine development is ongoing and is likely to be available by October. Certain groups are more vulnerable to swine flu, including children under 2, pregnant women and people with health problems like asthma, diabetes and heart disease.

Like the seasonal flu, swine flu spreads through coughs and sneezes of people who are sick.

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