

OFFICE OF
ROSEANN WRIGHT
PUBLIC HEALTH DIRECTOR



95 Scovill Street, Suite 100
Waterbury, CT 06706
Telephone (203) 574-6780
FAX (203) 597-3481

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
THE CITY OF WATERBURY
CONNECTICUT

Statement of Roseann Wright, RN, RS, MPH
Director of Public Health
Waterbury Connecticut
Before the
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
September 21, 2009

Opening Statement

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify at today's hearing "H1N1 Flu: Protecting Our Communities". I am Roseann Wright, Director of Public Health for the City of Waterbury, Connecticut. I am here today to share our experiences in Waterbury and how the public health department, school district, and School Nurses dealt with the H1N1 influenza outbreak.

The City of Waterbury is the fifth largest city in the State of Connecticut, 28.9 square miles in size and is home to a population of 107,271. In addition, Waterbury has 18,938 students enrolled in a public school system that is comprised of three (3) high schools, four (4) middle schools, and twenty (20) elementary schools. Six (6) private and parochial elementary schools and two (2) parochial high schools enroll a total of 3,000 students in addition to the public school system student body. Waterbury Public School District's statistical data clearly indicates that ninety-five percent (95%) of Waterbury Public School students are eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. Poverty exceeds 44% in many of Waterbury's low-income census tract districts primarily found in its north end and south end neighborhoods. Increasingly, Waterbury's student households are largely under-to-uninsured and rely on the services of the School Nurse within the School Health Program to act as the student's primary health caregiver.

To support the Waterbury Public, Private and Parochial School Systems, the Waterbury Public Health Department (WPHD) employs three (3) Nursing Supervisors, thirty-nine (39) School Nurses, and twenty (20) Public Health Aides which comprise the School Health Program for this municipality. Located within each public, private, and parochial school there is a School Nurse from the Waterbury Public Health Department, School

Health Program that is on-site for the entire school day. The School Nurse's assignment can be challenging in Waterbury's middle and high schools as those student body populations often exceed 1,200 students.

The goal of the School Health Program is to foster a proactive collaboration with the Waterbury Public School District and Private and Parochial Schools to attain the following objectives: 1) provide medical interventions for students requiring first aid or minor medical evaluation in the school health rooms, 2) creation of a comprehensive school health program that fosters health education tailored to age-related target populations within the student body and student households, 3) initiate comprehensive medical screenings, health assessments, childhood immunizations, sports physicals, and medication administration, and 4) tailor individual health care plans for students with medical risks and/or disabilities.

The following is a brief synopsis of the Waterbury Public Health Department's compilation of School Nursing interventions recorded for the 2008 -2009 school year:

Student encounters:	
Illness/first aid visits:	175,052
911 Call initiated:	130
Medications administered:	36,142
Special procedures:	15,069
School children immunized:	482
Total medical interventions:	226,263

I, as the Director of Public Health, cannot place enough stress on the importance of the School Nurse in the academic environment in terms of identifying, assessing and tracking communicable diseases within the school population. Identification of a communicable disease outbreak by the School Nurse within the academic environment is a potential indicator for a communicable outbreak within our community. In the event of any communicable disease, in this case H1N1, the School Nurse is an essential element of the public health team. The School Nurse is often the first staff member to identify common signs and symptoms of a communicable disease and alert the Public Health administrators. During the pandemic of H1N1, the Waterbury School Nurses are integral in conducting surveillance in school populations. The School Nurse is also delegated the responsibility of identifying students who need testing and medical treatment and subsequently report cases to their Nursing Supervisor.

Spring 2009 H1N1 Influenza Outbreak

Early in the spring of 2009, area hospitals and private practitioners were screening for H1N1 and receiving positive test results for the H1N1 influenza virus. During this time, a number of confirmed H1N1 cases were reported with increasing frequency, prompting the WPHD to proactively educate the public to try and minimize the spread of H1N1. WPHD set into motion a mass education campaign that was multimedia in its effect. Internally, the WPHD planned for the possibility of H1N1 to be the next pandemic and how could we protect public health personnel – such as our School Nurses and Public

Health Aides– from contracting H1N1. We reviewed the incidences of absentees within the student body to determine if outbreaks were occurring in the academic environment. In addition, daily communications between the School Nurses and their immediate School Nursing Supervisors demonstrated a significant increase in the frequency of influenza-like illnesses within the student population. WPHD also sent Sanitarians to every school to inspect all bathrooms ensuring there were plentiful supplies of hand soap, paper towels and that water temperatures were within 100 - 115 degrees Fahrenheit. The WPHD sent bilingual communications to parents of school-aged children through the Waterbury School Superintendent's Office that addressed the symptoms of H1N1, offered Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) prevention tips, respiratory etiquette and information regarding Swine Flu. School personnel also instituted new protocols for cleaning all school surfaces and high traffic areas.

WPHD conducted staff meetings with School Nurses, Sanitarians, and other professional staff. We urged all personnel to take special precautions and to be conscientious with hand washing and respiratory etiquette. Supervisors provided ongoing guidance and support to all staff. An important training tool utilized by this administration was a tabletop drill that was conducted in January 2009 for school nurses regarding their roles and responsibilities during a pandemic. This drill was an opportunity for the nurses to immerse themselves in a scenario that would test their responses if a pandemic were to emerge. This training would prove useful in the coming months.

The School Nurses and their immediate Nursing Supervisor became our sentinel for the community's health; thus we established new reporting procedures for reporting of possible H1N1 cases in the schools. Communications between the Mayor's Office and Director of Public Health occurred daily. Health Department administrators participated in weekly conference calls with the Connecticut Department of Public Health (CTDPH). There were increased communications between the WPHD, the Superintendent of Schools and all Private and Parochial Principals that addressed confirmed cases of H1N1 in their schools. At that point, the CDC was issuing early guidance which was incorporated into all of our protocols.

The City of Waterbury's first public incident occurred during a local field trip on April 30, 2009, when one of the elementary school students stated that she did not feel well and exhibited influenza-like illness. The child indicated to her teacher that she had just returned from spring vacation in Cancun with her family. This single occurrence caused panic and hysteria in mere minutes with school personnel, and parents. As a result, an elementary school was closed for two days by the Superintendent of Schools and every surface of the school and the school buses were sanitized in accordance with CDC guidelines. The WPHD and nursing supervisory staff were inundated by calls from parents and citizens in the community who were demanding further information as to the spread of H1N1 beyond this one incident. WPHD staff noted that this case was epic in nature because it had garnered so much public attention and brought H1N1 to the forefront of local news and community awareness.

The WPHD sent out letters through the Waterbury Public School District to all public school students and shared the contents of the letter with the School Nurses and principals of all parochial and private schools in the City of Waterbury. These communications highlighted prevention tips and respiratory etiquette, as established by the CDC. This was landmark guidance in Waterbury that established a single H1N1 protocol for all School Nurses – regardless of their assignment. The WPHD has one set of H1N1 protocols followed by all of its employees regardless of job site or assignment in order to ensure that a unified message is sent out to every student household in the City of Waterbury so there can be no miscommunication or confusion.

Non-Pharmaceutical Mitigation Interventions

It is imperative during the school year that the School Nurses practice non-pharmaceutical interventions such as infection control techniques:

- Hand sanitizer has been purchased by the Waterbury Public Health Department and has been placed in all school health rooms and outside of the cafeterias.
- Clorox wipes have been distributed to School Nurses and teachers.
- Pre-k to Grade 3 teachers have been encouraged to take frequent bathroom breaks so that students are washing their hands.
- Encourage all students and staff to stay home when they are ill and to only attend school when they are well.
- Custodians are cleaning surfaces and items that are likely to have frequent hand contact.
- We are paying special attention to our high-risk population which includes pregnant women, medically at-risk children, and adults over the age of 65.

The WPDH implemented our Pandemic Influenza Plan. A component of this plan is for the School Health Program to maintain an accurate emergency contact list for all personnel and community partners. School Nurses are also vertically cross-trained to provide a consistent standard of care throughout the City's health rooms.

As part of Connecticut's Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security Region 5, the Waterbury Public Health Department meets on a monthly basis with counterparts from health departments and health care entities. These meetings allow members share ideas and develop a coordinated response to an emergency. WPDH Nursing Supervisors also proactively collaborate with regional health supervisors to share and disseminate important information concerning mitigation strategies, lessons learned, and other valuable information which is shared with the School Nurses.

Expectations for 2009 - 2010 School Year

On August 31st the Superintendent of Schools sent out a letter to all parents/guardians that highlighted proper protocols when a child exhibits influenza-like illnesses and what the schools will do to maintain a healthy environment. That letter also mandated that students must stay home until all symptoms are gone AND for 48 hours thereafter

before they can return to school. This letter was shared with all Parochial and Private Principals so the message to parents and students was consistent throughout Waterbury.

In anticipation of the 2009 - 2010 school year, the WPHD developed new policies and procedures to prepare for H1N1 to appear in the student body relatively early in the school year. Those preparations consisted of staff meetings prior to the school year that reinforced the importance of health education including respiratory etiquette, hand washing, staying home when ill, and a review of signs/symptoms and reporting procedures. Pamphlets were distributed to all School Nurses and tracking and data collection tools were developed to monitor those students identified with influenza-like illness such as fever of 100 degrees or more, sore throat, and cough. This new data collection tool will allow the School Nurses to monitor siblings and will determine when a child can return to school per the Superintendent of School's guidance. Identifying influenza-like illnesses will assist the School Nurse if an outbreak is occurring in the school. School Nurses are required to identify students and staff with special medical needs and other medical complications which would potentially put them at higher risk for complications as a result of seasonal influenza and H1N1. When a School Nurse has identified an outbreak in the school, these at-risk students and staff will be notified. This notification allows high-risk students and staff to notify their healthcare provider and seek appropriate medical guidance. Some examples of at-risk populations in school would be pregnant students and staff, staff who are 65 years or older, students and staff with chronic medical conditions.

Monitoring illness in schools is a primary function for the School Nurses in order to identify H1N1 outbreaks as early as possible throughout the public, private and parochial school system. If a School Nurse excludes a child for illness (fever, sore throat, cough) they will assess that student upon his/her return to school which includes a risk assessment of the entire student household. School Nurses will work with WPHD and school administrators by collecting and reporting the number of school aged children and staff who are exhibiting influenza-like symptoms. We continue to prepare our School Nurses by keeping them abreast of any news or new guidelines from the CDC or CT DPH.

School Nurses are the medical professionals in school environments and can offer education to students, staff, and parents about the latest information about H1N1, how to maintain health, as well as mitigating interventions to decrease the spread of infectious agents. This can be accomplished through classroom presentations, fact sheets, newsletters, school web sites, and use of the media. Currently all School Nurses are distributing the *Cover Your Cough* and the *Six Prevention Tips* to all students coming to the School Health Rooms. Last year, 39 School Nurses encountered over 175, 000 students through health room visits. Providing continuous repeated education to this population will help to minimize the impact of the spread of H1N1. This is especially important for school-aged populations since most pandemics usually involve novel strains that result in higher incidence rates among those under 18 years of age due to lack of herd immunity.

Guidance from Federal and State Governments

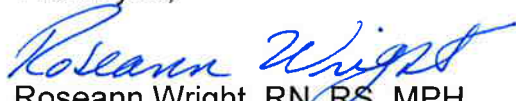
The WPHD is utilizing state and federal guidance documents as a tool to develop specific strategies that are customized to the needs of Waterbury's academic environment. These guidance documents are assisting us to minimize the spread of H1N1 amongst our students and school staff during the 2009 - 2010 school year. The guidance documents provide a variety of tools that Waterbury Public Health Department officials, School Nurses, and school administrators are utilizing based on the conditions found during the spring of 2009.

Although Waterbury is following federal guidelines regarding exclusion of the ill students and staff with influenza-like illness, we have adopted stricter guidelines that enforce exclusion for 48 hours after the resolution of symptoms. The Waterbury Public Health Department has embraced the universal nature of the guidance document because it allows us to incorporate the protocols contained therein to all K-12 public, private, and parochial schools in Waterbury. The federal guidance documents are assisting the School Nurses in minimizing the potential impact and decreasing the risk of exposure to H1N1 while limiting the disruption of day-to-day activities and thus facilitating educational continuity.

Like other urban cities whose populations are multi-cultural, significant linguistic and cultural challenges must be surmounted in order for health authorities to effectively offer prevention and public health protection as we mitigate exposure risk to H1N1 and other communicable diseases. The Waterbury Public Health Department is utilizing the guidance document as one of our tools to minimize the impact of H1N1. Waterbury recognizes we are not alone in the prevention and management of H1N1 and we share the same challenges and burdens as other municipalities across the State of Connecticut and the nation.

In conclusion, as the pandemic continues to increase in intensity, the role of the School Nurse will evolve from the traditional caregiver to also include functions such as health educator and sentinels for the community's health.

Thank you,


Roseann Wright, RN, BS, MPH
Director of Public Health
Waterbury, Connecticut