

It's not too late to get vaccinated against H1N1

by David L. Lakey, M.D.
Commissioner, Texas Dept.
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People have been asking me if it's too late to get the H1N1 flu vaccine to do any good. As a doctor, a father and the commissioner of health, this question concerns me.

The answer is no, it is absolutely not too late to get vaccinated. H1N1 is still killing people. It is still hospitalizing people. The virus is still circulating. We have a powerful tool in our arsenal against it - a vaccine that is safe, effective and now plentiful. People who have not been vaccinated should do so now.

We are concerned about what might be around the corner, especially if people lose interest in being vaccinated and another wave of illness hits us harder, faster and stronger because we became complacent. We have weathered two major waves of the illness so far, one last spring and one last fall. We have a window of opportunity before a possible third wave. Now is the perfect time to get vaccinated.

We certainly don't know what to expect from H1N1 flu. It is unpredictable. It might come back with a vengeance tomorrow.

It might disappear in the spring. From past pandemics we know that a resurgence of H1N1 early this year is very possible. We need to stay ahead of it. It's easier and smarter to prevent an illness than to combat it once it has already taken hold.

Predicting the severity and occurrence levels of any flu is fairly impossible. Traditional flu season is from October through mid-May. The highest levels of seasonal flu in Texas usually occur in January and February. But not always. H1N1 only appeared last April. We don't know yet if it will follow any seasonal pattern, and much hinges on the natural immunity that the population is building up.

Texas has been on the front lines since the H1N1 virus was first identified in the United States last year. We reported some of the first cases and unfortunately the first deaths in the country. In October we began distributing the initial limited supply of vaccine using an unprecedented, highly targeted system through our state health department. We have been diligently tracking deaths and hospitalizations of those with H1N1.

People who choose not to get

vaccinated put themselves and those around them at risk, especially babies younger than 6 months old who are too young for the vaccination. Nearly 200 babies younger than 6 months have been hospitalized with H1N1 in Texas. Sadly, deaths have occurred in every age group, young and old. Though most H1N1 illnesses have been relatively mild, no flu should be dismissed as "just the flu."

Many parents of children younger than 10 years old are due to take their kids for their second recommended dose. I suggest those parents also get themselves vaccinated at that time.

Physicians should continue to urge their patients to be vaccinated against H1N1 flu. Pregnant women in particular have had severe complications from this virus. People with asthma, diabetes, heart disease, lung disease and other health conditions are at a higher risk and should be vaccinated. Older adults and seniors also have shown to have complications when infected and should be vaccinated.

The good news is that we finally have enough vaccine. We have a flu vaccine locator at TexasFlu.org to help people find

doses close to them. Pharmacies, doctor's offices, local health departments and many schools have plenty of vaccine to go around. We had been looking forward to reaching this point since the first dose arrived in Texas in early October. The general public waited patiently as we targeted the scarce supply to those in the highest priority groups and then to other priority groups as supplies increased. Now, there is enough for everyone who wants it.

We must take advantage of this supply. As more people get vaccinated, the less we need to worry about the spread of illness during a possible third wave. Protect yourself. Protect each other.

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Government Jobs Expanding -- On Your Money

By Ed Feulner

Americans often wonder where all our tax money goes. Well, a good chunk finances a steadily-growing government workforce. State and local governments spent \$1.1 trillion on employee wages and benefits in 2008. That's half of what those governments spent overall.

And while the private sector job market remains bleak, there are more civil service jobs than ever. The federal Labor Department projects wage and salary employment in state and local government will increase 8 percent by 2018. That's a comforting thought for anyone who has to spend time in line at the DMV. Wish we could be as confident about the prospects for creating new corporate and manufacturing jobs to help pay for these new hires.

It's not simply the number of new jobs that costs taxpayers. It's that these government jobs pay more than ever. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that state and local government workers earn almost \$40 per hour in wages, salaries and benefits. That's more than 25 percent higher than the combined compensation of the average private sector job (\$27 per hour).

Public-sector employees have more paid leave and receive more than twice the health insurance benefits of private-sector employees. And government employees are famously more secure.

While the overall job market has been churning in recent years, destroying more jobs than it created, public-sector workers seldom are cut for any reason. Meanwhile, the number of government employees who voluntarily resign is one-third the rate of the private sector. "That suggests that state and local pay is higher than needed to attract qualified workers," notes Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute.

None of this seemed like much of a concern during good economic times. The growing economy of the mid-2000s generally brought higher tax revenues, providing more money for states and localities.

The recession ended that. Most states have seen tax revenues decline. Since states are required to maintain balanced budgets (a discipline the federal government routinely ignores), they've been struggling to make ends meet. A good chunk of last year's federal stimulus spending went to states to keep civil servants on the payroll.

But as Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels warned in The Wall Street Journal last September, "state governments will soon have to choose between a major downsizing or consigning themselves to permanent decline."

There's a bigger problem. Lord Keynes famously said that, "In the long run, we're all dead." But before they die, millions of retired state and local bureaucrats will drain trillions of dollars from taxpayers.

A report by Robert Novy-Marx and Joshua Rauh found that government pension funds are unfunded by some \$3.2 trillion. That's an extra \$27,000 that each American household will need to pony up in the decades ahead.

The price tag is so large because more than 80 percent of government workers are still eligible for old fashioned defined-benefit retirement programs. State and local governments are making massive spending promises, and taxpayers will have to pick up the tab. By contrast, such pension funds are only available to 20 percent of private-sector workers.

Civil service workers are also a throwback because they're heavily unionized. Last year some 7.9 million public-sector employees were in a union, while only 7.4 million private-sector workers were. More than a third of government workers pay union dues, while just 7 percent of the rest of the workforce is unionized.


Dan Heimerling of The Wall Street Journal writes that the unionization of government workers dates to a 1962 executive order issued by President Kennedy. As a cost-saving measure, President Obama could lift that order, since government employees would still enjoy the protection of civil service laws and greater job security than most private-sector workers.

It's time governments took control of their payrolls. After all, we'll all be paying for these decisions for decades to come.

Ed Feulner is president of The Heritage Foundation (heritage.org).


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