

Remarks by Secretary Napolitano and Education Secretary Arne Duncan at Today's Media Briefing on the H1N1 Flu Outbreak



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Secretary Napolitano: This is part of our ongoing effort to keep people posted on what is happening and what we're seeing, and to begin to address frequently asked questions. And I'm pleased to be joined today by Secretary of Education [Arne] Duncan.

The most frequently asked question we are getting is: why this flu is being treated differently than seasonal flu? In other words, you don't normally see the Secretary of Homeland Security talking about the seasonal flu outbreak. And the answer is because this is a new strain of flu. And during seasonal flu, which we have every year, and unfortunately it does end up resulting in the hospitalization usually of about 200,000 Americans and about 35- to 36,000 fatalities, that's the normal with seasonal flu.

But with seasonal flu, we also have a large part of our population that have developed antibodies, or pretty good antibodies, against it, as opposed to what we're seeing now. And what the H1N1 is is a new strain of flu. And that means that the normal antibodies you would have haven't yet developed. And that's why, for example, you will see a population affected like previously healthy adults that wouldn't be affected as strongly with a seasonal flu. So that's why all the precautions.

And because this is a new strain of flu, the scientists are still figuring out the epidemiology. They're still figuring out exactly what we're dealing with as a flu virus. And for that reason, it's important to lean into this, as we are, take precautions, as we are, without really knowing whether this is—or what kind of pandemic this will be.

Let me pause a moment on the word "pandemic" because there's been a lot of concern also raised with the World Health Organization. They've gone from level three to four, and four to five. And what happens if they go to level six? Well, a couple of things. One is, what those numbers represent is how widespread around the world a new virus is. In other words, if we're at level six, it means it's in a lot of places.

Now, we already know it's in the United States. It's been in the United States the last week. So we've already been undertaking precautions. What the levels do is tell countries that don't yet have any illness the things they probably ought to be preparing for because they'd better expect that it's going to get there sooner or later.

So if this goes to level six, you will hear me say, as I've said, is we are already preparing as if it is going to level six because the virus is already in our shores. And we again are relying, in terms of everything we have done and will do, on the best that the scientists can tell us, but realize that the picture for them is changing also. And it changes regularly, and we move with that change as well.

But to recap the last few days, the Department of HHS [Health and Human Services] declared a public health emergency on Sunday to free up resources, to begin prepositioning antivirals and other types of personal protective equipment. That also allowed the execution of an emergency authorization. That allows the antivirals to be prescribed beyond the normal population that they would be given to.

We've initiated a process to move millions of treatment courses of Tamiflu and Relenza out to the states. We have a stockpile of 50 million courses. We're going to move roughly 11 million courses to the states. That movement will be complete by this Sunday. In the meantime, and since we last spoke, HHS has authorized the purchase of replacement. So even as we move antivirals out to the public or out to the states, we're replacing the national stockpile.

The State Department did issue a travel advisory for nonessential travel to Mexico. We have been providing daily briefings and updates to state and local public health officials and state emergency managers, coordinating our response efforts with them and ensuring an open line of communication. We're also providing daily briefings to the

private sector, keeping them updated, and then really asking them to be partners here, to make sure they have looked at their continuity of business plans, and also make sure that they are thinking about their employees who may indeed, as this goes on, have to stay home from work either because they're sick or because they're with a child who is sick, so to be sympathetic to that.

We continue to emphasize that everybody has a role here. This is a shared responsibility, the government, the private sector government—and when I say that I mean all levels: federal, state, local, tribal—but also every individual. It's the common thing, and you're going to hear it a lot, which is: cover your mouth when you cough. Wash your hands regularly, and really wash them. Keep them washed. And also, if you are sick, stay away from school. Stay away from the workplace. Stay away from contained places like buses, airplanes, and the like, where you could spread the virus.

The President has requested \$1.5 billion in additional funds to help with the costs associated with this outbreak of H1N1. And at his Cabinet meeting this morning, he convened a special Cabinet meeting to discuss the latest developments in the coordination of the government's response among all the various Cabinet agencies.

So that's kind of where we are to date. If you need updated numbers and the like, we can get those to you. I want to pause a moment and say that the actual number of cases is probably not the most relevant number. Really, the most relevant number is the number of states that the virus has been confirmed in. And I think we are at 11 confirmed states right now, with several others with suspected cases. And so that map is continually updated, and the National Operations Center, which is located here, updates those numbers twice a day. And when we say "confirmed," we mean confirmed by the CDC.

So with that, let me introduce the Secretary of Education, Secretary Duncan, to talk a bit about how this is affecting our school-age population.

Secretary Duncan: Thank you so much, Secretary, and thanks so much for your leadership and hard work on this issue. We are all rightly concerned about the potential health impact of this flu. But as Secretary of Education, I am also concerned about the impact of this flu on learning. As of today, about 430 public and nonpublic schools are closed for reasons related to this flu outbreak. And just to put that in a little bit of context, we have almost 100,000 schools in our country. So this is less than half of one percent of our schools that have been impacted.

Let me first speak to parents. The safety of your children is absolutely our number one concern.

To the school superintendents and principals: I urge you to continue to take your cues from public health officials in your area, in your state, and at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health and safety have to come first. If you have a confirmed case of H1N1 flu among children or adults at your school, or if anyone at your school is personally connected to someone with the flu, like a family member, then the CDC recommends you strongly consider closing school for up to 14 days.

Now to teachers. Teachers, we please ask you to think about reworking upcoming lesson plans so students can do their schoolwork at home, if necessary. Have assignments ready to keep them busy and engaged for up to a week or two, including handouts or books that students can take home so that learning continues. Make sure you know how to reach your students at home in case school does close. Maybe you can continue the classroom conversation and instruction by e-mail or online or by phone.

To parents and guardians, I know it can be inconvenient when your child's school is closed. If you have to stay home from work, use that opportunity to keep your children—keep your child up to speed. Learn about what they're learning in school, and keep them on task.

And finally, to our students: you also need to do your part. And the Secretary talked about this idea of shared responsibility. And also, most importantly, this school year isn't over yet. Don't fall behind your peers at other schools that are still in session. Keep working hard, and we absolutely want to finish this school year strong. Our basic theme is keep safe and keep learning. Thank you.

Secretary Napolitano: And one addition for that is if a school is closed and children or students are being asked to remain at home, for parents and guardians, that means they are to remain at home. The whole idea is to contain the spread of this virus. And we don't get the containment feature of closing a school if all our young people do is go to the mall or elsewhere. So if they're being asked to stay home, that's exactly what we mean.

And the reason we're asking that is because this is a flu that is transmittable human to human, and it's relatively transmissible. So again, close contact can provide an avenue for this flu to go from one to another. That's why

we're watching and have a containment strategy with all of our advice for the public at large.

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