

Remarks by Secretary Napolitano at Today's Media Briefing on the H1N1 Flu Outbreak and the U.S. Government's Response



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Office of the Press Secretary
Contact 202-282-8010
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Secretary Napolitano: This is the daily briefing to bring everybody up to speed on where things are with respect to the 2009 H1N1 virus.

The three of us just returned from the Hill. We testified—at least, [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Interim Deputy Director for Science and Health] RADM [Anne] Schuchat and I testified—before the Senate Homeland Security Committee, and then the three of us were present for a bipartisan briefing at the United States House of Representatives to make sure that the members of Congress are being kept up to speed. And of course, I am delighted to be joined today by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, because I have a feeling we're going to be joined at the hip on this for quite a while as we move forward.

As you know, and I'm sad today to report, that today we had our first confirmed death as a result of the H1N1 virus in the United States. It was a 23-month-old child, and our sympathies go out to her family out of this. But as I said and have been saying, this is a flu, and a flu cycle. We think we're at the beginning of a flu cycle, which typically brings with it some severe illness and death. Indeed, in the normal seasonal flu cycle, we will have about 36,000 deaths in the United States. That's a fact that surprises many. But it is part and parcel of an influenza cycle. So our thoughts are with those who have contracted the virus now, and of course for the family of the child who died.

We now have 10 states with confirmed incidents of H1N1—Arizona, California, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Texas. We are likely to see more states, more cases, and some more hospitalizations over the coming days, and we are prepared for that.

Every American should know that we are aggressively responding to this outbreak. Antiviral medications are en route to states to supplement their own stockpiles. Indiana, New York, New York City, already have their allocations. Several other states will receive their allocations by today. And all states will receive theirs no later than the third of May.

Let me point out an important difference here. There's been some confusion between antiviral and vaccine. A vaccine is administered to prevent the flu from occurring. An antiviral is occurred after you get sick to mitigate the symptoms so that you feel better. So it is the antiviral stockpile that I'm referring to now.

We're also actively monitoring travelers at our land, sea, and air ports. We're watching them for signs of illness, and we have appropriate protocols in place to deal with those who are sick. Precautions are being taken to protect travelers and border personnel. Anyone exhibiting symptoms is being referred to an isolation room where they can be evaluated by a public health official before proceeding to their destination*.

I know there have been some calls to close the border. I want to address that directly. First of all, it is important to know that we are making all of our decisions based on the science and the epidemiology as recommended to us by the Centers for Disease Control. The CDC, the public health community, and the World Health Organization [WHO] all have said that closing our nation's borders is not merited here, that the focus, the public health focus, should be on mitigating the impact of this virus. And so we are following those recommendations now.

As I said, we continue to actively monitor those coming across the borders and at our airports, as we've been doing all week. And we are also distributing flyers and public health information to individuals. As of today, Customs and Border Protection has referred a total of 49 suspected cases to the CDC or state and local officials. All the results have been negative, except the eight that are still under study.

I know that in addition to travelers, many parents across the country are concerned about school closures, and

President Obama spoke about this earlier today. The Centers for Disease Control has recommended that schools with confirmed cases of H1N1 virus or schools with suspected cases linked to a confirmed case consider closing on a temporary basis. Some schools have already followed that advice. The best thing parents can do right now is to make sure you have a contingency plan in place so that you've made arrangements to care for your child in the event of a school closure.

This is also a good reminder for businesses to think about contingency planning as well. As I said, we're going to be working through this for a while. You have to anticipate what happens if you have employees who are parents. The schools have closed. The employees need to stay home. How do you continue with your business operations? And so all of us should be dusting off our business contingency plans, looking at things such as telecommuting and the like so that operations keep on going.

And of course, we advise anyone with flu symptoms to stay home or consult a doctor if you have severe symptoms. This is a problem that every individual can help us with by adopting common sense solutions or precautions. Cover your mouth or nose when you sneeze. Don't go to work or school or go on a plane or a bus if you are sick so that you don't communicate the disease to others. And wash your hands often.

I know that the Secretary of Health and Human Services is going to have more to say on that topic and on others, so let me close here and ask Secretary Sebelius to come forward.

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*corrected typo; changed destruction to destination

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