

H1N1

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to formally advise this House that yesterday the Department of Health and Social Services was able to publicly release its plans to vaccinate the residents of the Northwest Territories against the H1N1 influenza virus. As Members are likely aware from media reporting, provincial and territorial health officials have been awaiting final approval of the vaccine from Health Canada before moving forward with immunization programs. That we were able to announce the plan for the Northwest Territories just hours after final approval was received is testament to the extensive planning and preparation my Department has undertaken.

We all have a responsibility to protect ourselves and each other – and, in doing so, to do everything we can to prevent the spread of H1N1 in our communities. Getting immunized against H1N1 is a key part of that. On Monday, October 26th, the Department of Health and Social Services will begin delivering the biggest immunization program in NWT history. The department has been working hard behind the scenes over the past weeks to make sure we were ready to initiate that program as soon as the vaccine was approved.

Mr. Speaker, the Government of the Northwest Territories has ordered enough vaccine to immunize every NWT resident who wants to be immunized. Our plan is to have completed our immunization program by November 21st. The vaccine has already been shipped to communities to facilitate its timely delivery. Larger communities will start holding mass immunization clinics this coming Monday. To ensure coverage in smaller communities, the Department has hired more staff and established mobile H1N1 action teams that will travel throughout the NWT administering the vaccine.

Our goal is to vaccinate as many NWT residents as we can as soon as we can. We will be assisted in our efforts by 4th year nursing students from Aurora College. The Registered Nurses Association has engaged to ensure our teams are licensed and ready to go.

We know that remote northern communities are at greater risk for H1N1 outbreaks. To combat this, Dr. Kami Kandola, the NWT's Chief Public Health Officer, is recommending that all NWT residents get the flu shot. I would like to echo this recommendation and invite Members to join me in assuring their constituents that the vaccine has been thoroughly tested and is safe and effective.

Mr. Speaker, in order to ensure that our upcoming vaccination program is successful, we recognize that NWT residents must have a clear and common understanding of the situation we are facing. We have a proactive awareness campaign underway to help inform residents about the H1N1. The Department of Health and Social Services has distributed posters to all communities in the NWT, arranged ads running on local radio and TV stations, and hosted press conferences for members of the media. Most of this information has been translated into Aboriginal languages and aired on community radio and displayed in health centres. And, as I have done throughout this situation, I will continue to provide Members of this Assembly with regular updates on the latest status of H1N1 activity.

Along with the vaccine and communication products, the Department's efforts to fight the flu have focused on four main areas.

- Slow the spread – through good public messaging on hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, healthy lifestyles and self isolation.
- Treatment – providing all healthcare providers with guidance on the appropriate use of anti-virals and guidelines for the management of residents with the flu, providing the public with information on self-care and establishing the Flu Hotline to offer advice on self-care and when to see a health care provider.

- Surveillance – carefully tracking flu activity in the NWT to quickly respond where clusters of influenza like illness are seen.
- Vaccination – taking advantage of the opportunity to be vaccinated is the best way for NWT residents to protect themselves and others and shorten the pandemic period in the NWT.

I would like to encourage residents to call our Flu Hotline number if they do fall ill or have questions about the flu. The Flu Hotline is staffed by trained nurses and they can determine whether or not you need to visit your health centre or emergency department. Calling the Flu Line first will help to avoid unnecessary congestion at these areas. The Flu Hotline can be reached at 1-888-920-3026. The NWT Healthline is also available 365 days per year and can be reached at 1-888-255-1010.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff at the Department as well as the frontline health care workers in our health authorities. During this pandemic they have once again stepped up to the plate and demonstrated their professionalism and dedication to the delivery of quality health care services to residents of the NWT.

We all have a role to play in working to minimize the impact of H1N1 in our communities. I would like to thank other GNWT departments that have been working hard on this issue, members of the media for helping us get clear and accurate information about H1N1 out to the public, and the public and Members of this House for working with us to prepare for and address this serious public health issue.

Thank you.