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NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SWINE FLU: A LETTER FROM THE HEALTH OFFICER

HANFORD - We have community members fighting in two wars. We are in the midst of the worst recession in 80 years. Our farming community is badly hurting because of drought. We don't need another big problem. There have been no confirmed or probable cases of H1N1 (swine) influenza identified in Kings County. The situation is very fluid and no one can predict what may happen. I think it is likely enough that Kings County will experience H1N1 (swine) influenza that we all should begin making some preparations.

The H1N1 virus is new. This means that none of us will have any immunity. We aren't yet certain of the potency of this virus. It now appears to be about as potent as a typical seasonal influenza virus. Right now it appears at worst that we'll have a lot of otherwise typical flu in our community. A large number of cases will impact all segments of our community. The health care system and schools are two examples. Other businesses and services will also likely be impacted.

The ability to test for this new virus is very limited. It's a wonder to me that we have any reliable testing for a new virus. There is no way that clinical/diagnostic testing for this new virus can be developed quickly. The testing done so far in the state has revealed that for the time of year we happen to have a rather high rate of typical seasonal influenza going on in the state. If you presently have influenza symptoms, it's more likely that you have a garden variety strain. The flu shot you received last fall won't provide any immunity to H1N1. Vaccine development and manufacture always takes time. There won't be any vaccine available for a while, probably six months or more. The virus is sensitive to two antiviral drugs, Tamiflu and Relenza. These drugs provide only marginal benefit in the typical influenza case. Should we experience a pandemic, it's unlikely that the supply of these drugs will meet the demand for general use. The drugs are most effective when used for critically ill, hospitalized patients. We should make it a priority to have the drugs available for these patients.

Most of us have survived prior episodes of influenza. Most of us will do fine with care that can be provided at home. My department has posted some tips for home care on our web page: <http://www.countyofkings.com/Health/index.html>. Now would be good time to stock up on your favorite fluids, some soup and anti-fever drugs. In most cases the worst of the illness will be over in 4 to 7 days so you won't need large supplies. Small children, people with chronic diseases and the very elderly are at higher risk of having complicated influenza. They or their caregivers should seek professional advice if influenza is suspected. Call your regular health care provider, the clinic in your community or the Kings County Public Health Department if you need advice.

We can all help to prevent the spread of influenza in our community. If you're sick, stay home. If you have to go out, cover your cough and wash your hands frequently. Properly dispose of your used tissues. Consider carrying a paper bag for that purpose. If you are going to a clinic, phone ahead. The clinics can take precautions to prevent the spread of influenza in waiting rooms if they know you're coming in. Be prepared to be asked to wear a simple surgical mask when you enter a clinic. Surgical masks aren't useful to help healthy people stay healthy. They are a very effective means of preventing influenza when worn by the ill person. These measures are something that we really should be doing at all times as a means of preventing the spread of disease in emergency departments and clinics.

People at high risk for complicated influenza should consider self-imposed semi-isolation. You can choose to avoid crowds. Post a sign at your door asking people who are sick to come back another time. Try not visit people suspected of having influenza. If you do, try to stay six feet away from the ill person. If you touch anything in the ill persons home, keep your hands away from your face until you're had a chance to wash them thoroughly.

If you're a caregiver for someone with influenza, know how to limit the spread of the disease in your home. To the extent possible, limit the number of caregivers to as few as possible. Everyone else should stay six feet away. Caregivers and visitors should try not to touch anything in the room and keep your hands away from your face until they've washed them. Encourage the ill person to always use a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Have the ill person dispose of the tissue in a handy brown paper bag.

It's time that everyone takes a few minutes to plan for pandemic influenza. I recommend that you visit www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/index.html. This document is available in multiple languages and is very comprehensive. The health department is committed to keeping you informed about H1N1. I've tried to share with you my understanding of the current situation. I will keep our community informed should things change.

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