



Public Advocate for the City of New York

**SHOT IN THE DARK:
CITY FAILS TO PROVIDE ACCURATE
INFORMATION ON FLU VACCINATIONS**

A Report by Public Advocate for the City of New York

**PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM
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The New York City Office of the Public Advocate conducted an investigation last week to assess the availability and accuracy of information provided by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) for New Yorkers seeking to obtain a flu shot.

METHODOLOGY

From October 19 – 22, staff from the Public Advocate’s office surveyed all points of access available to New Yorkers for information on the influenza vaccine including 311, the Flu Information Line, the Immunization Hotline, the FLU Line, the Children’s Immunization Hotline, and the Vaccines for Children Program Line, as well as the DOHMH web site. Phone investigators posed as the parent of an 18-month-old child or the child of a 70-year old mother to assess the availability and accuracy of information on how, where and when to get flu vaccinations for persons in these age groups.

FINDINGS

Part One: City Hotlines Difficult to Reach and Operators Provide Inaccurate Information

Investigators’ results varied in reaching live operators at the City’s flu and immunization phone lines. When callers were able to reach a live operator, information provided by the flu and immunization lines was largely inaccurate. Operators repeatedly provided faulty information about flu shots for infants while information regarding seniors was generally more accurate.

311

All six calls placed to 311 reached live operators. Operators transferred all six to the Flu Information Line.

Flu Information Line

Operators at the Flu Information Line answered 18 out of 27 calls placed by investigators. All ten investigators who spoke with operators regarding flu shots for infants received wrong information.

- Operators improperly instructed six investigators to take their infants to DOHMH walk-in clinics. DOHMH clinics do NOT offer the pediatric flu vaccine and infants aged six to 23 months are not being vaccinated at these facilities.
- Two callers were erroneously advised to take their children to local senior centers to receive a shot. Follow-up calls to the senior centers confirmed that they only provide vaccinations to individuals over 65.
- One operator referred an investigator to a local church that was supposedly administering flu shots to infants. Multiple dialing attempts reached the answering machine of a private home.

- Another operator told an investigator she should contact the child's pediatrician about receiving a flu shot. When asked what to do if the pediatrician did not have the vaccine, the operator replied that there was nothing that could be done to help since DOHMH clinics do not serve infants. In fact, there are community-based child health clinics throughout the City administering pediatric vaccinations.

Immunization Hotline

Just five out of 33 calls made to the Immunization Hotline were answered by operators. Callers who did not reach an operator heard a recorded message explaining "due to high call volume your call cannot be answered at this time." The message directed callers to try again later or to call the Flu Information Line for information on clinic locations and hours of operation. The three callers who were able to speak to operators at the Immunization Hotline were directed to call the Children's Immunization Line.

FLU Line

Investigators called the FLU Line and determined that the number connects callers with the Immunization Hotline. No further calls were made to the number.

Children's Immunization Hotline

The Children's Immunization Hotline answered all calls placed by investigators. All five of these calls, which pertained to infants, were referred to local community-based child health clinics. Investigators followed up with the five clinics, but only two were able to schedule vaccination appointments. Two of the other clinics turned down the vaccination requests, stating that vaccines were reserved for existing patients. The other clinic stated that it had run out of vaccines.

Vaccines for Children Line

Five out of five calls made to the Vaccines for Children Program reached live operators. All of these calls, which pertained to infants, were inappropriately referred to DOHMH walk-in clinics, which, as previously stated, do not provide pediatric flu vaccines. DOHMH previously instructed parents seeking flu shots for uninsured children to contact this service.¹

Part Two: Problems with Information on the DOHMH Web Site

Conflicting Information on Who Should Be Vaccinated

For weeks, the DOHMH web site² stated that "Flu vaccination is recommended for those aged 50 and over and for those with chronic health problems." This recommendation conflicted with guidance issued by the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as materials found elsewhere on the DOHMH web site, which advised that only those over 65, as well as other high-risk individuals, receive flu shots.

¹ Department of Health and Mental Hygiene <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/public/press04/pr143-1015.html>. Accessed 10/19/04.

² Department of Health and Mental Hygiene <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/imm/immclin.html>. Accessed 10/19/04.

Although the DOHMH web page was corrected recently, it is likely that the inaccurate information was a source of confusion for New Yorkers.

Conflicting Information on Where to Call

The DOHMH web site provides a variety of numbers for New Yorkers seeking flu-related information. Researchers identified the following six numbers: 311; the Flu Information Line: 1-888-799-8789; the Immunization Hotline: 212-676-2273; the FLU Line: 1-866-LINE; the Children's Immunization Hotline: 1-800-325-CHILD; and the Vaccines for Children Program: 212-447-8175.

The DOHMH web page³ that provided the number 1-866-FLU-LINE indicated that this number takes calls from 8am-9pm. In fact, this number actually connects callers with the Immunization Hotline, which is scheduled to operate 8am – 5pm but as previously mentioned, rarely answers calls. DOHMH recently removed this number from this web page, although it is likely that the information was a source of confusion for New Yorkers.

Problems Getting Information on DOHMH Clinics

The web site listed⁴ seven DOHMH clinics providing flu shots. A single number (212-676-2273) -- the Immunization Hotline -- was provided for all seven sites. The vast majority of calls placed to this number went unanswered, as detailed above.

Problems with the Influenza Vaccine Facility Locator

The Department's online Influenza Vaccine Facility locator provides information on DOHMH clinics, senior centers, and other locations where individuals can receive a flu shot. The locator allows site visitors to use a clickable map, a zip code search or a drop down listing of facilities by borough to identify sites administering flu shots.⁵

Users are unable to search for facilities according to the population served -- a significant problem given that the vast majority of facilities catalogued in the locator serve only those 65 and over -- not adults of other ages and not infants.

- Parents seeking to obtain a flu shot for an infant aged six months to 23 months are not served well by the DOHMH locator. Using this tool, investigators were unable to locate a single facility serving this age group. Unfortunately, the DOHMH site gives no indication that the locator excludes facilities administering pediatric flu shots.
- It is also difficult to find a facility that serves individuals aged four to 64. Investigators in search of facilities serving children over four and adults under 65

³ Department of Health and Mental Hygiene <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/imm/immprog.html>. Accessed 10/19/04 and 10/22/04.

⁴ Department of Health and Mental Hygiene <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/imm/immclin.html>. Accessed 10/19/04.

⁵ Department of Health and Mental Hygiene <https://a816-health12ssl.nyc.gov/dohroot/prjflp/>. Accessed 10/19/04.

found only the seven previously mentioned DOHMH Immunization walk-in clinics with the help of the locator.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the national vaccine shortage, many New York City residents are understandably concerned about how to receive a flu shot. Now more than ever, it is imperative that individuals receive timely and accurate information regarding the administration of flu vaccinations. To better assist New Yorkers seeking flu-related information, the Public Advocate recommends that the DOHMH take following steps:

Ensure that flu-related phone lines are adequately staffed.

In light of the current influenza vaccine shortage, DOHMH officials should consider hiring additional phone staff as a temporary measure. New Yorkers deserve timely access to flu-related information.

Train phone operators to make appropriate referrals.

Operators of the City's various flu and immunization lines should be trained to handle all sorts of inquiries regarding flu shots – particularly those concerning infants six to 23 months of age. DOHMH officials should inform operators that DOHMH clinics and senior centers do NOT provide pediatric vaccinations. DOHMH officials should also regularly update operators on facilities administering flu shots and the populations they serve, the availability of the vaccine, expected clinic wait times and other relevant issues.

Conduct a thorough review to ensure the accuracy and consistency of all DOHMH web materials pertaining to flu shots and the current vaccine shortage.

New York City residents rely on DOHMH to provide quality information regarding health matters. The department does New Yorkers a disservice by presenting conflicting and inaccurate information on its web site.

Simplify information on where to call.

As previously mentioned, investigators identified six different numbers listed on the DOHMH web site as sources of flu-related information. The department should review the varied functions of the flu and immunization lines and consolidate functions and phone numbers where possible. Materials should be revised to reflect these changes.

Improve the accessibility of information about walk-in clinics.

The DOHMH web site instructed individuals to call the Immunization Hotline for information about the clinics. As our findings indicate, most callers are not reaching live operators on this line -- rather, they are hearing a message which instructs them to call the Flu Information line for clinic details. If the Flu Information line is the best source of clinic information, the DOHMH web site should be revised to reflect this.

The issue of overcrowded flu clinics has been widely reported by the media. Individuals have a legitimate interest in learning about the availability of the vaccine, wait times, and other concerns.

Note the limitations of the Influenza Vaccine Facility Locator.

DOHMH should clearly indicate that the locator does not provide information about facilities providing pediatric flu vaccinations.

Improve the Influenza Vaccine Facility Locator over time.

The Facility Locator has the potential to be an extremely helpful tool. The department should aim to include facilities that administer pediatric flu shots in the locator. DOHMH should also add a feature to the tool that will enable users to search for facilities serving a particular target group (i.e. infants, seniors, adults under 65).