

## **Wilton, the H1N1 and Emergency Preparedness**

What does one think of when Wilton's emergency preparedness is being discussed? Thoughts immediately turn to how the Town may respond to the many natural disasters and emergencies that may befall us, major thunderstorms, localized flooding, fires, snow and ice storms and the like. Some may even think of terrorist attacks, school shootings and a variety of other threats that could be carried out against the citizens of our community. Emergency preparedness is the critical element in bringing these types of emergencies to a satisfactory conclusion.

Recently, however, Wilton faced a different type of threat, the threat of a pandemic H1N1 flu outbreak. This H1N1 is a novel influenza virus. It is considered a novel virus because most people do not have immunity to its unique mix of virus which is comprised of Eurasian and American swine, human and bird genes. While the current H1N1 flu strain lacks several genes believed to increase lethality, like all viruses, once inside a cell that it infects, it is quite capable of breaking apart and reassembling in ways that can make it more easily transmissible and thus unpredictable.

The Town of Wilton has been preparing and planning for this type of threat to our community for some time. It was exactly our vigilance in public health preparedness planning that paid off in the rapid response the Town was able to mobilize to address the threat posed by the H1N1 flu virus. Key to that mobilization was the formation of the Town's Flu Response Team.

Early in the initial stages of the outbreak, news agencies were reporting cases of a new flu-like illness that seemed to be spreading in Mexico and then reported several incidences in a school in New York. It was then, during those early stages, that our plan was set in motion. The Wilton Flu Response Team coordinated and held meetings involving the Health Department, First Selectman, Superintendent of Schools, Nursing and Homecare and other key emergency management personnel. These meetings resulted in the development of a school H1N1 Response Plan to address procedures for the possible closing of the schools and notification of parents of school-aged children to the potential of an outbreak at the schools. Another result was the development of a Town webpage dedicated to disseminating flu and other official information regarding the Town's response activities and plans. Critical to this process was the constant contact between the Town and State Health officials who, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), formulated guidelines for handling school closures and other response protocols. Still today, the schools communicate with parents through letters, email notification systems, and website postings informing them of the

current status of possible H1N1 cases and other information related to the outbreak. The Flu Response Team continues to be vigilant and is monitoring flu activity within the schools and the community.

So where do we stand today? According to the CDC, as of early June, the number of cases seems to be declining in the nation as a whole, but there are some areas where illness is ongoing. Cases of H1N1 are confirmed from all 50 states. The global rate or incidence is increasing with the World Health Organization reporting 19,273 cases in 66 countries and on Thursday elevating the H1N1 outbreak to an official pandemic level.

Locally, we have seen a recent uptick in the number of ILI (influenza-like illnesses) reported in the school-age population in the last week or so. Most of these cases have been mild and only required treatment normally associated with a seasonal flu. With that being the case, what can you do to help prevent the spread of this or any other flu virus?

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. If a tissue is not available cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- Stay home if you get sick. CDC recommends that you stay home from work or school for 7 days from illness onset or 24 hours after symptoms subside whichever is longer and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.
- Have a Family Emergency Plan -- If this had been more severe (or if it becomes severe this fall/winter), greater disruption to our daily lives may result (school closures, cancellation of mass gatherings, etc.)

Currently, the CDC is working with laboratories and manufacturers internationally to develop pilot type vaccines which may be considered for future use. While a decision on if and how to use a vaccine will not be made for some time, the Town continues its planning. The mass dispensing drills for seasonal influenza immunization clinics held for the last two years provided opportunities to identify areas that needed attention and strengthen and hone our response capabilities.

Over the summer, the Board of Education will be providing information to parents of school children. The Town's Flu Response team will be communicating with the health care community through its Health Alert Network and will continue to update

information on the Town web-site ([www.wiltonct.org](http://www.wiltonct.org)) with official guidance. Please check the site regularly.

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