

School Health Centers and H1N1: A Model for Health Care Reform

Wash your hands and sneeze into your elbow. Stay home when you're sick. We hear these messages daily as flu season rapidly approaches. These are the same tactics that will slow the spread of the H1N1 virus. But we know it won't stop it.

Federal, state, and local health officials are working tirelessly on plans for launching one of the largest vaccination efforts in decades. Meetings and conference calls abound over the efficacy of the vaccine, and questions about who will administer and pay for it, and where the vaccination will be administered.

One obvious place to reach a large population that has been used for just this purpose historically: schools. Children, considered one of the highest risk groups to get and spread H1N1, are already in school; schools are located in neighborhoods that are more easily accessible than many medical facilities; and if vaccinations are provided at the school, it's one less extra trip parents have to make during the day.

For some fortunate schools, they have an added feature: comprehensive school health services that include a school nurse and a school-based health center, with licensed medical staff qualified to administer vaccines, and systems in place to store the vaccine and maintain medical records.

School nurses and school-based health centers have the potential to reach a large audience – children, youth, and families – with a variety of health services and information because they are integrated into the school. And just like a pediatrician's office, they can provide assessment and referrals for all types of conditions, including those who may have H1N1 or other illnesses or chronic conditions.

Most importantly, school-based health centers and school nurses support educational goals by working to keep children and youth in good health so they don't miss class and are ready to learn.

It's an interesting confluence of events that while our Congressional legislators are debating an overhaul of our health care system, the nation is bracing for what is expected to be an onslaught of sick citizens. An untold number will likely need a physician's care and will not be able to afford medical care or may not have access to it. Without health care reform, we have a possible public health epidemic on our freshly-washed hands.

That is why the comprehensive school health services model must be expanded. When both the school nurse and school-based health center are present at a school, the relationship is collaborative and complementary. However, there is not nearly enough of either to reach the millions of students attending our nation's schools. While both health care delivery systems are perfectly positioned to respond to this need, they do not receive the state and federal funding required for such a widespread campaign.

In the health care reform bills currently being debated in Congress, our legislators have wisely included provisions for school-based health centers and for increasing the number of school nurses.

What's needed now to ensure the health of our children – and our nation – is the will to make health care reform a reality.

Linda Juszczak
Executive Director
National Assembly on School-Based Health Care

Serena Clayton
Executive Director
California School Health Centers Association