

**Commissioner Heather Howard
Department of Health and Senior Services
Testimony on H1N1 Influenza (Swine Flu)
Assembly Health and Senior Services and
Homeland Security and State Preparedness Committees
Monday, May 4, 2009 – 11AM**

Good Morning, Mr. Chairmen.

With me today are two key members of our response team: Dr. Susan Walsh, Deputy Commissioner for Public Health Services and David Gruber, Senior Assistant Commissioner for Health Infrastructure Preparedness and Emergency Response, who is also the State Influenza Response Coordinator.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide the members of both committees with an update of the national outbreak of H1N1 Influenza, commonly known as Swine Flu, as well as an overview of the work that the Department of Health and Senior Services and our health care partners are doing to protect the public and to communicate with our federal, regional, state, local and health care partners during this evolving public health outbreak.

As of yesterday, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is reporting 226 confirmed cases of Swine Flu in the United States. Thirty states are affected. In New Jersey, there are seven confirmed cases of Swine Flu and one probable case.

It is important to note that the cases are scattered throughout the state, which indicates that we do not have a single, non-family cluster.

As we monitor what is happening throughout the country and around the globe, it is clear that we can expect to see additional cases of Swine Flu in New Jersey. While there is reason for concern, there is no cause for alarm. New Jersey residents should continue to go about their daily routines. Children should go to school; people should go to work.

I understand that New Jersey residents are concerned and anxious. They are worried about their health and safety and that of their families. This is a natural response as we continue to understand how the virus is moving across the country.

New Jersey is prepared to deal with this evolving public health situation. The state has been recognized nationally as a leader in preparedness and has plans in place to address a wide range of public health emergencies. These plans are constantly being reviewed, tested and refined. In fact, these plans are the basis of our response and allowed us to act quickly.

The Department began responding immediately last week when this situation began to unfold. Surveillance activities were increased so that health officials would be able to alert us of potential cases of Swine Flu.

Last Monday, Governor Jon Corzine convened a meeting of cabinet members to ensure that New Jersey's efforts were coordinated within state government. I know you will hear more on this later in the hearing. We are also working closely with our regional and federal partners.

The team at the Department continues to monitor how the disease is spreading and to investigate suspected cases of Swine Flu. The Department's public health lab is also prepared to deal with an increased number of samples coming in for testing.

In addition, last week the state received 300,000 courses of antiviral medications, including Tamiflu, from the Strategic National Stockpile. These courses were added to the 800,000 courses New Jersey previously purchased. We know that Tamiflu, a medication available by prescription through physicians, is effective in reducing the symptoms and length of influenza if taken within 48 hours of developing symptoms. In 2006, under the leadership of Governor Corzine and the Legislature, New Jersey made the right choice to purchase the maximum allowable amount of antivirals. We are better prepared because of this important investment.

Every day we have been reaching out to New Jersey residents with daily public health messages and we will continue to provide the public with this important information. We have had conference calls with hospital and health care officials, county and local health officers and school officials.

To help ease the public's concerns, last Wednesday the Department opened up a 24-hour toll-free information line for both the general public and healthcare providers. That number is 1-866-321-9571. This hotline has already received over 2,500 calls.

In addition, the Department has created a Swine Flu webpage that includes links to the CDC website and to general information on influenza. The Department continues to issue press releases when necessary in English and Spanish.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of practicing good hygiene habits to prevent illness. These simple public health protections are the best weapons we have against the spread of disease. They are:

- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes.
- Stay home from school or work if you are sick.

I want to thank you again for this opportunity to provide you with an overview of this evolving public health outbreak.