

# Schools, local governments, work to stop H1N1

Partnerships between local governments and Catholic schools can be complicated.

When it comes to H1N1 influenza vaccinations in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, however, the relationship appears to be smooth.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people between 6 months and 24 years of age are among the target groups for vaccinations, in an issue that carries considerable urgency.

Nearly 200 children in the United States have reportedly died of the flu strain since March. According to the office of Governor Martin J. O'Malley, since June there have been a total of 35 deaths associated with H1N1 in Maryland, and a reported 940 hospitalizations.

Anne Buening, pastoral associate to Auxiliary Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, has coordinated the archdiocese's H1N1 education efforts.

"The state of Maryland decided that each county is responsible for the immunization of high-risk people," Buening said. "Every county is different, every health department is different."

That was evident in a sampling of schools in the archdiocese.

In Howard County, health officials called Sally Schwerdt, a nurse at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Ilchester, to inform her they would be administering shots Nov. 17.

"Children basically have little to no immunity to it," Schwerdt said, "so we wanted to protect our children as much as possible against this new flu virus."

Schwerdt sent an informational letter and consent form home to families. Of 225 students at the school, 131 received vaccine shots. Schwerdt said some students had already received the vaccine through their family doctor, while some families

expressed concerns over potential side effects.

Parents were encouraged to be with their children Nov. 17, to provide comfort.

"It went very smoothly," Schwerdt said. "A few children did cry, but most of them said it just pinched and wasn't a big deal."

In Anne Arundel County, there was a sense of calm at Glen Burnie's Monsignor Slade Catholic School. According to principal Gregory Jones, H1N1 absences have been extremely low.

"I felt confident going into the situation that we would be able to manage it well," Jones said.

Jones cited a thorough education program implemented by the school's nursing staff, which included Katherine Lynn.

Anne Arundel offered nine immunization clinics at public high schools, three each on the nights of Dec. 1, 2 and 3, that were open to all residents in target groups.

"The parents seem to prefer to do it with their pediatrician," Lynn said, noting that for some the decision hinges on the between the nasal spray and the shot. "I think a lot of people are still nervous about the spray. I think some students would rather get the shot for fear that the spray is the live virus."

According to Buening, immunizations are made available to Catholic schools in Baltimore City, if they receive Title I federal assistance and if the school agrees to offer them.

At Mother Seton Academy, principal Laura Minakowski said the school chose not to offer the vaccine to its 66 students.

"We recommended families go to their own provider," Minakowski said.

St. Margaret School in Bel Air had a small outbreak in late September and early October. It became the first school in Harford County to offer the H1N1 flu mist vaccine, according to principal Jane Dean.

She said of the 806 students at St. Margaret, 399 received the vaccine Oct. 9. Harford will not administer vaccinations without family permission, and St. Margaret parents were notified in a variety of ways about the opportunity.

The county has provided seasonal flu vaccinations for St. Margaret the last two years.

"I think that helped us," Dean said.

St. Margaret has full-time nurses available on each of its two campuses. The middle school, which was more affected by the H1N1 virus, is located at St. Margaret's parish mission, St. Mary Magdalen.

Dean said the school prepared for the virus in August, making sure cleanliness was a priority.

"We had all kinds of precautions and did everything we were supposed to do," Dean said.

Buening said the county and school relationships were landmark.

"A lot of private schools, and many public, never had to develop these partnerships," Buening said. "All these health people are heroes to me."

*Paul McMullen contributed to this story.*