

County prepares for mass vaccinations

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

MURDOCK — The **Charlotte County Health Department** has developed a plan it feels will carry the community through what is now considered to be the most dominant flu strain in the world.

The **health department** has set a goal to get every county resident vaccinated for the H1N1 virus, commonly known as swine flu. And as small shipments of vaccines continue to pour in, the county will continue to expand its list of potential recipients.

It hopes to complete the voluntary mass-vaccination by early next year.

“We thought it would slow down during the summer and all it did was keep going,” said **Health Department** Administrator Steven Mitnick, who presented the plan to county commissioners Tuesday. “As we get the stock, we’re moving it out.”

The county’s received 12,300 doses since the shipment arrived about one month ago. It still has a long way to go before all of Charlotte’s 160,000 residents get vaccinated, Mitnick said.

The **health department** has been primarily focusing on schools and health care workers thus far, with vaccinations distributed by invitation only. However, the department announced Tuesday it has scheduled its first public H1N1 vaccination clinic open to the public.

The clinic is slated for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Nov. 18 at the Charlotte County Event and Conference Center in Punta Gorda.

The clinic will focus on those who fall into one of the targeted priority groups — pregnant women, healthcare personnel, and those ages 6 to 64 years who have chronic immune system complications.

The **health department** hopes to roll out vaccinations for the general public by January, Mitnick said.

“There’s been some difficulty in the (vaccine) production,” he said. “The key at this point is to just do anything you can to stay healthy.”

Symptoms of swine flu include fever, headache, dry cough, runny nose and body aches.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised people to reduce their risk by washing hands as often as possible, maintaining a 6-foot social distance, covering coughs with a sleeve, and staying home if symptoms occur.

While the supply for vaccines has remained relatively low, rumors surrounding their ineffectiveness are creating a more severe challenge, said Wayne Sallade, director of emergency services.

“So far we’ve been able to meet the demand of schools and clinics,” he said. “My biggest concern is the reluctance.”

Sallade said the recent reports that the H1N1 vaccination carries side effects or could potentially become harmful are 100 percent bogus.

The reports are just rumors, and while it isn’t mandatory, he suggests everyone get vaccinated.

“It’s the anxiety factor that’s creating a setback right now,” Sallade said. “People think (the vaccines) were rushed to production and that’s not the case. I would rather be safe than sorry.”

While the virus has had relatively mild effects on healthy adults, Sallade expects a stronger second wave early next year.

The **health department** is also recommending residents get vaccinated for the seasonal flu.

“We’re handling it the best we can, taking care of the high risk first,” Commissioner Robert Skidmore said. “We have been very proactive as a county, and will continue to do what we can with the resources we have.”