

Area demand slows for H1N1 vaccines

By **JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER**

PORT CHARLOTTE — H1N1 vaccinations are moving to the private sector, with supply plentiful and demand receding.

An outcry from the community to get vaccinated has turned into more of a murmur, with Walgreens, Publix and Winn-Dixie now providing the service. But to help get through the final wave, the Charlotte County Health Department will continue its weekly clinics for at least another month.

"We have it pretty well under control," said Kathi Drake, temporary H1N1 community outreach officer with the health department. "When this first began, we were seeing huge interest. The numbers have since slowed, and we still have more than enough vaccines."

Since the health department began its weekly clinics earlier this month, attendance has slowly deteriorated. The staff is vaccinating between 100 to 200 residents weekly at each of the three locations, but the showings aren't near the lines that appeared during the scattered clinics of the fall, Drake said. The health department will continue offering the weekly availability until the end of February, when the staff will reevaluate the situation. A Saturday drive-through clinic is also scheduled for 9 a.m. Jan. 30 at the Punta Gorda Fire Department on U.S. 41.

The drive-through clinic will be the first offered by health department for H1N1, but the system was popular for seasonal flu shots, with residents never having to leave their cars to get vaccinated, Drake said. The health department will also visit Charlotte County elementary schools this month to distribute the second doses recommended for children under 9. "We still have enough need to keep it going," Drake said. "Plus with our resources, the smaller numbers are easier for us to control."

The health department set a goal last year to get the entire county vaccinated through its voluntary program by the end of winter. The vaccines were first offered to high risk groups before moving to the current blanket approach.

Still, some county officials are concerned with a lack of interest by area residents. "I would be lying if I said I was satisfied with the numbers we've seen," said Wayne Sallade, director of Emergency Management for Charlotte County. "There's far more vaccines available than people who've gotten the shot, and that's concerning."

While the H1N1 virus has hit somewhat of a standstill, Sallade said he expects a second wave to emerge this spring. He also recommends people get vaccinated for the seasonal flu, with the heart of the season still ahead. "We began offering H1N1 vaccines earlier this month, and so far it's been pretty steady, depending on the area," Walgreens spokesman Robert Elfinger said. "We definitely have ample supply for everyone."

E-mail: jsalman@ sun-herald.com