

VIDEO/PHOTOS: Crist urges vigilance in dealing with swine flu during Fort Myers stop

By Naples Daily News staff report

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NAPLES — Gov. Charlie Crist visited Fort Myers Friday as part of a multi-community campaign to help prepare Florida residents and parents for the start of the new school year and the threat of swine flu.

Speaking at Gateway Elementary School in East Fort Myers, Crist said parents need to heed guidelines for preventing the spread of H1N1, the virus that causes swine flu.

“There are some very basic, simple, common sense steps to encourage that,” he said.

Children and adults need to stay home if they have flu-like symptoms, need to sneeze in their elbow and wash their hands frequently.

“If you feel sick, stay at home, it’s very important,” he said.

When asked why he has been traveling the state to speak about precautions against swine flu, he said there are two million reasons why, a reference to school-age children in the state. Health officials say the population at greatest risk for swine flu are infants six months of age up to 24 years old.

“The last thing I would want to happen is some epidemic to occur,” Crist said. “I want to be sure we are in front of this issue.”

Lee County public health officials announced earlier this week they are following guidelines that children with flu-like symptoms will be sent to school clinics for evaluation and potential isolation until a parent or guardian can come pick up the child.

Schools also are stepping up vigilance by staff to identify potentially ill students and custodians are increasing clean-up efforts of structures that are touched frequently, such as door handles and handrails.

Also speaking at the press conference were Florida's Surgeon General, Dr. Ana Viamonte Ros, and Eric Smith, Florida Education Commissioner. Viamonte Ros said all the departments are working cooperatively to get the message out about preventing the potential spread of swine flu.

"Just remember to keep yourselves and your children home if you are ill and make sure you continuously wash your hands," Viamonte Ros said. "This is a great time of year to go to your health care professional and review your health history. We are here to make sure all of your students are healthy and able to learn most effectively."

With respect to a swine flu vaccine and when it would become available, Crist said the state is being told mid-October.

Federal health officials are projecting 30 to 40 percent of the population could become infected with swine flu between now and the next two years.

Swine flu has taken the lives of 48 Florida residents since the pandemic began this past spring, which included two Lee County residents. Spring Creek Elementary School in Bonita Springs was closed for a few days this past spring when confirmed cases of swine flu were found in two students.

Several inmates in the Naples Jail Center were confirmed as having swine flu and were kept in isolation until their conditions improved. Another 69 inmates who were exposed to the ill inmates were quarantined.

Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department, said local health departments get updates weekly about developments with a swine flu vaccine and the message also changes weekly.

"They are still finishing the drug trials so we don't know if the vaccine works and they have to manufacture it and deliver it," she said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has prepared two funding sources to help state and local governments respond to a pandemic, she said. The Lee health department has gotten word it can expect about \$200,000 to help shore up plans.

"That's based on population," Hartner said. The money will be used to hire more people for administering the vaccine and other delivery logistics.

"Vaccinating tens of thousands of people is daunting," she said.



