

# A shot in the arm

## Lee's swine flu fight off to pointed start

BY FRANK GLUCK • FGLUCK@NEWS-PRESS.COM • OCTOBER 30, 2009

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**1:10 A.M.** — More than 3,300 people showed up for free swine flu vaccinations Thursday in south Fort Myers and Cape Coral, a small enough turnout that two more free clinics likely will have enough doses to open Monday.

Lee County Health Department officials wanted thousands to get their inoculations, but not so many that all 9,000 doses on hand would run out in one day.

The health department estimates 1,562 vaccines were administered at South Fort Myers High School between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. The other clinic, at Mariner High School, gave out about 1,770 doses.

Health department director Dr. Judith Hartner called the tallies “very positive.” “Through this effort, a lot of people in Lee County are now protected from the H1N1 virus,” she said.

Lee County is expecting two shipments from vaccine producers in the coming days. The problem is, the health department doesn't know how many doses it will get.

Officials had initially considered canceling the free clinics planned for Monday at Fort Myers High School and Lehigh Senior High School.

But for now, those are a go.

Concerns about shortages prompted long lines outside South Fort Myers and Mariner High on Thursday.

Cynthia Clements and her 60-something parents, who she said had chronic health problems, were first in line at South Fort Myers High. They arrived at 5:30 a.m. “I had heard about the risk of lines and didn't want to be at the end or turned away if they ran out,” said Clements, 35.

Joy McGrath, 61, of Cape Coral got in line at Mariner High around 8 a.m. She said her doctor advised her to get a shot because of her weakened immune system. About 30 people were ahead of her waiting to get in.

Once inside, she said the process went smoothly.

“It’s amazingly well organized in there,” she said. “The shot only took 30 seconds; it’s everything else that takes forever.”

Those early birds would likely have had a much shorter wait if they had come well after the clinics opened.

Take the South Fort Myers High School clinic. For those who arrived when it opened at 10 a.m., waits were about an hour

By noon, the lines had all but evaporated at both clinics. Many people got through in about 10 to 15 minutes.

Credit for that likely goes to the scores of volunteers at both clinics. Each had about 140.

Elke Sexton brought her 4-year-old son to Mariner. They got through in about 10 minutes.

“I was afraid they wouldn’t have any left by the time I picked him up from VPK (voluntary pre-kindergarten),” said Sexton, 35. “I expected to come and wait for about one hour.”

The health department is giving vaccine priority to those considered a high-risk for swine flu complications.

They include pregnant women, those between the ages of 6 months and 24 years, those who live with children younger than 6 months and anyone 64 years old and younger who have underlying health problems.

Though that’s the policy, it has not been strictly enforced. No one showing up for a vaccination Thursday was asked to provide proof of age or medical condition.

Rationing has been a necessity because of chronic vaccine shortages. Producers, who were given a much shorter time window to produce the difficult-to-make vaccine, haven’t been able to keep pace with demand across the country.

In Florida, vaccines are distributed to counties based on their populations. For example, if 100 doses were available statewide, Lee County would get roughly three doses, because Lee makes up about 3 percent of the state population.

The health department steadily built up its vaccine supply in the preceding weeks before deciding it had enough to open the free clinics, Hartner said.

— Staff writer Mae Yousif-Bashi contributed to this report.