

# Swine flu clinics to end soon in Lee County

**Last vaccine clinic to be held Saturday**

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**1:10 A.M.** — It was an ambitious goal: The Lee County Health Department would vaccinate 200,000 residents for free against the swine flu virus, especially targeting those at the highest risk for flu complications.

Instead, as of this final week of scheduled mass clinics, the department has inoculated roughly 30,000 people and has plans to soon turn over most of its vaccine supply to private medical providers.

Those providers, such as local pharmacies, will be the area's primary vaccine source and will be permitted to charge about \$20 per dose.

"It's a tried and true system used for the seasonal flu," said department director Dr. Judith Hartner. "People can just get vaccinated at their own pace."

But department officials had not anticipated things to work out this way when it drafted its vaccination plan this summer.

The department had up to \$1.6 million in federal money available, essentially as a line of credit, and ultimately enlisted a legion of paid and unpaid volunteers to staff clinics held at area high schools.

Officials drew up a strategy for as many as 50 such clinics, each prepared to serve 4,000 people.

Instead, it held about half that clinic number, and attendance averaged between 1,400 and 1,800. It spent about \$625,000 of the federal money.

What happened?

Department officials blame two seemingly contradictory forces.

They say that public skepticism kept many people from the clinics, but officials say they probably wouldn't have had enough vaccine even if turnout had been as high as hoped.

Indeed, supply has been a problem nationally. Federal officials initially hoped to make the vaccine available by early to mid-October. Instead, Lee didn't receive enough to hold its first clinic until the end of October.

Supply shipments came irregularly, and officials said they did not know how much they were getting until a few days before each one arrived.

One swine flu clinic was canceled because of low turn-out. Four others were scrapped because of vaccine shortages.

“It’s been a juggling game all along with the vaccine,” said Bill Mallett, the Lee health department’s assistant director. “That’s been a real limiting factor.”

But Hartner lays most of the blame on vaccine skepticism.

“Certainly supply is not as reliable as we would have wished,” she said. “The bigger issue is there hasn’t been as much public acceptance of the vaccine for whatever reason.”

A Harvard University School of Public Health survey conducted in September found that 30 percent of respondents were worried about vaccine side effects. It also found that only 40 percent of adults planned to get vaccinated and 51 percent were “certain” to get their children vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week released the results of trials on four swine flu vaccines. The studies show that most adverse results from the vaccine were mild and similar to that of the seasonal flu vaccines.

Five people have died in Lee from swine flu-related causes, and dozens have been hospitalized, public health officials said.

Julie Murphy’s 9-year-old daughter, Hayli, spent a month in a medically induced coma and almost died in October.

Before that, San Carlos Park resident Julie Murphy said she avoided flu shots because family members reported feeling ill after getting them.

“I hated the flu shot,” Julie Murphy said. “Now, she has to get one every year.”

Finding the vaccine outside of the health department has proved difficult for many.

Some physicians have it — the department has distributed 64,430 doses to doctors — while others have told their patients to go to the free clinics.

A review of area pharmacies illustrates the shortage.

None of the 25 CVS pharmacies in the Fort Myers area had any as of Monday, according to the company.

Walgreens’ swine flu vaccine locator shows that the nearest available location is a store in Arcadia.

The federal government’s swine flu shot locator at [flu.gov](http://flu.gov) shows no pharmacies have the vaccine in Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero or Lehigh Acres.

The final Lee County vaccine clinic, which is open to anyone regardless of age, will be held between 9 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Saturday at Estero High School, 21900 River Ranch Road.

While the department may still hold some additional small clinics for children and targeted geographic areas, no new mass department-sponsored inoculations are expected.

It will continue to provide free vaccines for anyone showing up at the health department's Pondella Clinic, 83 Pondella Road in North Fort Myers, said spokeswoman Jennifer James-Mesloh.

"We're always going to be in the business of swine flu vaccine," James-Mesloh said.