



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Somali Bantu Refugees Step Forward to be Vaccinated Against H1N1

Mark National Influenza Vaccination Week (Jan. 10-16)
with the H1N1 Flu Shot or Nasal Spray

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WINOOSKI – The H1N1 influenza vaccine does not contain any pork products.

That key message was delivered by Mohamed Shabaan Abdi, president of the Somali Bantu Community Association of Vermont, as he discussed the importance of being vaccinated against the H1N1 “swine” flu. Somali-Bantu who are Muslim are prohibited from eating pork products, according to Islamic law.

Abdi arrived in Vermont from Africa in 2004 and assumed a leadership role in helping the Health Department promote vaccination as the single best protection against getting ill.

The Health Department is promoting National Influenza Vaccination Week (January 10-16) by recognizing those individuals who have strengthened the Vermont Department of Health mass vaccination campaign.

Abdi’s family was the eighth to arrive in Vermont as part of the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program. While many adults in the Bantu community have acquired English language skills, communicating the importance of getting vaccinated against the H1N1 flu has been an ongoing challenge.

“The number one barrier is the language issue, and culturally many people don’t believe in vaccination,” Abdi said. “Many believe in other treatments where a traditional healer is involved. It’s been difficult at times.”

Somali Bantus began arriving in Chittenden County in 2003 as part of a U.S. government resettlement plan. The Bantus are recognized as a vulnerable population, a group that escaped persecution in Somalia and cannot safely return home. The community in Vermont has grown to more than 600 individuals over the past six years.

Many Bantu refugees are resistant to getting shots, Abdi said, because when they first arrive in America there are a given series of mandatory vaccinations.

“When they think of shots they think of getting blood drawn and a whole process, and they don’t think it helps a lot,” he said. “It just means more shots for them.”

Another issue, according to Abdi, was the impression by some people that the vaccine was harmful. Abdi had to repeatedly emphasize, the vaccine will not cause any harm.

The one point Abdi kept returning to during community meetings was the impact the flu was having on young people and children. Media reports, he said, were not always helpful, but the pictures clearly showed something bad was happening. Children were getting sick. Some children would die.

“We explained to them the nature of death in the community - and that the children need to be immunized,” Abdi said. “I said, ‘You may not get sickness,’ we have to explain it to them in a way that makes sense for them. We told them how many kids overall were sick. This was an outbreak. People were suffering. People were hospitalized. Then we told them – ‘You need to get the shot.’”

Abdi said the community, slowly but surely, has come around, and many refugees have been immunized.

“It does feel good,” Abdi said. “It feels good to help your community.”

H1N1 vaccine is widely available at many sites around the state, including health care provider offices, hospitals, pharmacies, and public clinics.

To locate a public clinic, go to the Health Department's website at www.healthvermont.gov, then select "**Get Vaccinated**" at the top of the home page. Guidelines for deciding about medical care are available at the Health Department's website: healthvermont.gov or dial 2-1-1, and at the federal website flu.gov.

You can also follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/healthvermont.

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