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**An important message to
New Jersey's developmental disabilities community from the
Division of Developmental Disabilities and
The Arc of New Jersey
about the H1N1 Flu Virus**

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Anyone who is caring for, or cares about, someone with a developmental disability should be aware that certain underlying medical conditions often found in people with these disabilities can make them susceptible to more severe complications from the flu virus than individuals without these conditions. This is of particular concern since the World Health Organization recently declared a global H1N1 flu pandemic. It is important to note that a pandemic declaration is based on the sustained worldwide spread of H1N1, not the severity of illness caused by the virus.

We want to stress that individuals with developmental disabilities are at no greater risk of contracting the H1N1 virus than any one else. However, you should be aware that:

- Any individual who has a developmental disability that affects respiratory function has a higher risk of complications.
- Any individual who has chronic pulmonary (including asthma) cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological (including sickle cell disease), neurological, neuromuscular or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus) has a higher risk of more severe complications.
- Any individual whose developmental disability affects their ability to communicate and report onset or worsening of symptoms can be at higher risk of complications because of the potential for a delay in identifying influenza infections.

Because of these complication risks, individuals with developmental disabilities should be vigilant about taking preventative measures that can help them avoid the flu. This is especially critical because there is no vaccine currently available for H1N1, and seasonal flu vaccinations do not provide protection against H1N1.

Like other flu viruses, H1N1 is spread person-to-person, and anyone who comes into contact with other people could be exposed to the virus. Recommended preventative measures include:

- Wash your hands frequently, preferably with soap and water. An alternative is to use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, but first refer to facility policies around their use, especially in regards to individuals who have a habit of placing their fingers or hands in their mouths.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, or practice the habit of coughing or sneezing into your inner elbow if you don't have a tissue. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer after sneezing or coughing into a tissue.
- Keep the environment around you as clean as possible. Studies have shown that influenza virus can survive on surfaces such as books and doorknobs for as long as eight (8) hours. To prevent the spread of the virus, dispose of tissues and similar items in the trash. Clean and sanitize frequently-touched surfaces (such as desks, doorknobs, computer keyboards and toys) regularly.
- Individuals with the H1N1 virus may be infectious for approximately 24 hours before they develop symptoms. While you do not want to avoid all human contact, be alert and even cautious about attending events that may involve large crowds or groups of people.
- Avoid contact with anyone who is sick until that person becomes well.
- Talk with your primary care physician about any steps he or she thinks you should take to be prepared including where to take the individual if he or she becomes ill when the doctor is not available, such as the ER on the weekend. In some cases, physicians may recommend antiviral medication for individuals who are at high risk for complications from the flu. If your physician recommends medication, she/he will tell you when and how to take this medication.

People with flu-like illnesses usually have temperatures of 100° F and a sore throat or cough in the absence of another known cause (e.g. strep throat). If the individual you are caring for develops a flu-like illness:

- Take him or her to the doctor, or the alternative location suggested by the doctor, as soon as possible and follow the doctor's instructions.
- Keep the individual with a flu-like illness at home for seven (7) days and until all symptoms have resolved.

Finally, we encourage you to become knowledgeable about the H1N1 virus and stay abreast of any new developments or recommendations. Some very good sources on the Internet include:

The World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/en/>

The federal Centers for Disease Control: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/>

The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services:
<http://www.state.nj.us/health/er/h1n1/>