

March 2019

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Do you have a communication plan for immunizations?

Preventable diseases are showing up around the country. Once on track for eradication, children are getting sick with measles, mumps and whooping cough in greater numbers as parents opt out of required immunizations. Do your parents understand the immunization requirements and deadlines for your state? Do you have a communications plan for this important topic?

Diseases make a comeback

Contagious, deadly diseases that were once thought to be nearly eradicated can make a comeback if immunization rates fall too low. Recently, measles cases are popping up in several states with serious effects on children and families. Infected children, and other children who were exposed to them, must miss school. Their families face high medical costs and lost work productivity, and the lasting effects of the disease can be debilitating or deadly.

What could happen:

“We know that a disease that is apparently under control can suddenly return, because we have seen it happen in countries like Japan, Australia, and Sweden. Here is an example from Japan. In 1974, about 80 percent of Japanese children were getting pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine. That year there were only 393 cases of whooping cough in the entire country, and not a single pertussis-related death. Then immunization rates began to drop, until only about 10 percent of children were being vaccinated. In 1979, more than 13,000 people got whooping cough and 41 died. When routine vaccination was resumed, the disease numbers dropped again.

The chances of your child getting a case of measles or chickenpox or whooping cough might be quite low today. But vaccinations are not just for protecting ourselves, and are not just for today. They also protect the people around us (some of whom may be unable to get certain vaccines, or might have failed to respond to a vaccine, or might be susceptible for other reasons). And they also protect our children’s children and their children by keeping diseases that we have almost defeated from making a comeback.”

www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vac-gen/whatifstop.htm

Facts about vaccines

Sources for the following facts are at www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-vaccines

1. In the past 60 years, vaccines helped eradicate one disease (smallpox) and are close to eradicating another (polio).
2. Vaccines prevent more than 2.5 million deaths each year.
3. Scientific studies and reviews continue to show no relationship between vaccines and autism.

(Over)

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

Reproduction rights for materials distributed as part of *On Call* are granted only to subscribing districts and are restricted to distribution as part of their local public relations programs.



4. New and underutilized vaccines could avert nearly four million deaths by 2015.
5. Vaccines cause “herd immunity,” which means if the majority of people in a community have been vaccinated against a disease, an unvaccinated person is less likely to get sick because others are less likely to get sick and spread the disease.
6. Vaccines helped reduce measles deaths globally by 78 percent between 2000 and 2008.
7. There are existing vaccines that could stop rotavirus and pneumonia — two conditions that kill nearly three million children under the age of five every year.
8. The CDC has reported a 99 percent reduction in the incidence of bacterial meningitis caused by *Haemophilus influenzae* since the introduction of the vaccination against the disease in 1988.
9. Not all vaccines are given as shots. Some vaccines are given orally.
10. Most diseases prevented by vaccines are no longer common in the United States. If vaccines weren’t used, just a few cases could quickly turn into tens or hundreds of thousands.

Herd immunity

Herd immunity is an important point that should be emphasized in materials. Immunizations are intended to protect individuals as well as the larger community from diseases. This community immunity benefit develops when a majority of the population is immunized. It reduces the risk of disease and creates a buffer of immunization for people with lower immunity, such as infants, pregnant women or the elderly. Some people cannot get vaccines themselves because of specific health issues. If people around them are immunized, they can also be protected from risks of the diseases.

Facts about opting out

All states require vaccinations for children who attend public schools and daycare centers. And all states allow exemptions for children with allergies, compromised immune systems and/or families with religious or philosophical objections. See a map of state laws and vaccine requirements: www.nvic.org/Vaccine-Laws/state-vaccine-requirements.aspx.

Extensive information for parents about vaccines, disease symptoms, and treatment options are available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://bit.ly/2TyVHwc>

Developing your communication plan for immunization

Infectious diseases are a local and a global concern. Misinformation, or a lack of information about vaccines, is a primary reason for non-vaccination.

“Proactive communication actions are needed to curtail and prevent negative publicity and resistance to immunization, and to build continuous trust in vaccination programs by working with opinion leaders who influence caregivers’ perceptions and behaviors.

Positive attitudes and good interpersonal communication skills of frontline health workers are decisive to promote long-term compliance — well-designed, easy-to-use tools can often bridge the gap if interpersonal communication skill-building programs cannot be assured.” <http://bit.ly/2S3p3Ge>

A strategic communications plan can help ensure that all parents are getting complete and accurate information to make informed decisions about immunizations and school requirements.

For more information about strategic communication plans, see *How to Write a Comms Plan*, August 2018. Key elements include goals, target audiences, messages, tactics, budget, responsible parties and evaluation metrics.

Goals

Do you need to increase immunization rates across the district or in one school? Or do you want to share general information about immunization facts with the larger community to ensure that accurate information is circulating among parents and staff?

Target audiences

Schools should contact parents directly if their children lack required vaccines, but they should also communicate with audiences that can affect opinions about vaccines, including all parents and staff. Be sure to inform your key communicators and consider possible partnership opportunities with healthcare providers in your community.

Messages

It is essential to identify key messages that resonate with each audience. What do you need them to know? It may help to do an informal poll of sample audience members to identify information that may be lacking. Ask people about their understanding of the issue to identify information gaps and misinformation.

Tactics and budget

Parents should be able to easily find information about deadlines and requirements. And staff who are key communicators with parents should have sufficient information in the form of fact sheets, talking points, accessible web content and regular updates from district experts.

Step one should be the district and school websites. Develop a section dedicated to immunization requirements, deadlines and resources. Make it easy to find and highlight it during key dates, such as school registration dates and immunization exclusion deadlines. Include fact sheets about vaccinations and diseases. Consider adding a list of healthcare providers and clinics where vaccines are available, including free clinics if available.

Tactics that may be effective include email newsletters, printed flyers, fact sheets and newsletters, text and phone alerts, social media content, digital ads and radio announcements, ads and interviews.

Be sure to include options for two-way communications such as an informational line for phone calls or emails, dedicated staff who can respond to questions or opportunities for questions and answers at public forms.

When you are ready to update your plan, evaluate your efforts by checking immunization rates among students over the prior year. Consider an electronic survey for staff and parents.

The following chart and example will help you develop your communication plan.

Tactic	Target Audience	Timeframe	Responsible Party	Metric
Website	Parents, staff, Community Members	Dates for developing and publishing content	Communications staff, technology staff	Successful on-time launch, including useful content and resources

Resources

Immunization
Communications

Why Invest in Communication for Immunization? Evidence and Lessons Learned

<http://bit.ly/2S3p3Ge>

March 2019
Page 4

National School Public Relations Association Sample Strategic Communications Action Plan

<http://bit.ly/2MKj0R0>

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant