Transforming Health Care in Alaska

2011 Report/2010-2014 Strategic Plan Update

Alaska Health Care Commission

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6. Immunization against Vaccine-Preventable Disease

Findings

- Until the mid-20th century infectious diseases were a leading cause of illness, disability and death in Alaska. Few effective treatment and preventive measures existed. Since that time there has been a dramatic decline in the burden of infectious disease in the population due to significant achievements in control measures, especially for those diseases for which vaccines have been developed.

- During the 20th century the success of biomedical science in development of vaccines combined with the success of the public health system in immunizing the population led to the eradication of smallpox from the worldwide population and the elimination of polio from the U.S. population. Furthermore, immunizations have resulted in substantial declines in other diseases that had previously been a common cause of serious illness and death among children, such as measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, and bacterial meningitis.

- Despite remarkable progress in vaccine development and use, there are a number of challenges in maintaining sufficient immunization levels to protect the population.
    - Vaccination schedules have become increasingly complex. U.S. children require 19 doses of vaccine by age 35 months to be protected against 11 childhood diseases.
    - The success of immunization policies in controlling once-dreaded diseases has led to complacency among some subsets of the population toward vaccines.
    - Insufficient and erroneous information about vaccine safety and effectiveness creates confusion among parents, who must recognize immunizations as an important tool in protecting their children's health and actively seek them.
    - Health care providers must be kept informed of the latest developments and recommendations.
    - Vaccine supplies and financing must be made more secure.
    - Researchers must address increasingly more complex questions about safety, efficacy, indications, contraindications, and delivery.
    - Information technology must be used to support timely vaccination.
    - Adolescents and adults must be targeted for vaccine-preventable diseases that affect their age groups, such as influenza and pneumonia.

- Alaska's childhood immunization rate has declined in recent years to nearly the lowest in the nation. Alaska's rate of immunization completion for children ages 19 months to 35 months was just 56.6% in 2009, compared to the national average of 70.5%, ranking Alaska 49th among the 50 states and leaving Alaska's children vulnerable to preventable diseases that can result in serious complications, preventable hospitalizations, and in some cases death.

- The Alaska Division of Public Health, Department of Health & Social Services, maintained a "universal vaccine program" (providing all recommended childhood and adult vaccines to public and private health care providers in the state) for over three decades. The vaccine program was supported almost entirely with federal funding from two different sources, one of which is reducing its annual allocation to Alaska by $3.6 million in a phased 3-year reduction starting in FFY 11.

- As a result of the loss of funding the state discontinued provision of all adult vaccine and of human papillomavirus and meningococcal vaccines for children in FFY 11, and will no longer provide the following childhood vaccines for children who are not eligible for the Vaccines for Children Program ("VFC"; a program for children who are American Indian/Alaska Native, on Medicaid, or uninsured) beginning in FFY 12: influenza, pneumococcal conjugate, and rotavirus.
- Elimination of the universal vaccine program is expected to have the following consequences:
    - Reduction in the number of small private medical practices that provide vaccine to their patients due to the complexities of maintaining separate vaccine supplies (per VFC administrative requirements), and the cost of up-front purchase of expensive vaccine;
    - Reduced immunization coverage leading to increased risk of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, mumps, pertussis, chicken pox and hepatitis A; and,
    - Inability to maintain a stockpile of vaccine to support timely response to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease.

Recommendations

- The Alaska Health Care Commission recommends the State of Alaska ensure the state's immunization program is adequately funded and supported, and that health care providers give priority to improving immunization rates in order to protect Alaskans from serious preventable diseases and their complications.