Flu Story: Monterey Health Department Behind the Scenes During Flu Season

Each influenza season, the Health Department’s Public Health Bureau mobilizes to prevent and control the spread of influenza in Monterey County. This year’s flu season has been deadly - there have been five fatal cases among individuals less than 65 years of age in Monterey County alone.

During flu season, a multi-disciplinary team tackles different aspects of the issue to protect public health. Some of this work is in the public eye. Much of it is ‘behind the scenes,’ but very important for us all.

“We save lives,” says Monterey County Health Officer Dr. Edward Moreno.
Prevention
It is 6:30 a.m. on a dark, winter morning. The Monterey County Health Department’s Immunization Coordinator, Angie Gladstone, is on her way out the door with a box of flu vaccine in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

“It’s a real life-saver,” says Gladstone, but she’s referring to the vaccine, not the coffee.

Vaccination is the single most important step in the flu-fighting process. The Immunization Program has distributed 6,800 doses of flu vaccine this season to community providers and clinics for vaccinating residents with minimal or no health insurance. The Immunization Program also coordinated the employee vaccination campaign, which protected more than 1,330 County employees from the complications of influenza infection this year.

Watchdogs
The Public Health Bureau’s Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit monitors hospital emergency room visits and alerts community providers when influenza activity begins to increase each season. Predicting the start of flu season and understanding what types of influenza are circulating are also important aspects of controlling the spread of disease each season. Analyses and information about flu severity are sent to medical providers each week to help guide patient treatment.

The Bureau’s Vital Records Unit monitors death certificates for deaths that might be associated with influenza.

Under the Microscope
The Public Health Laboratory, the only Biosafety Level III laboratory in the region, uses advanced techniques to determine not only if a person has the flu, but to inform medical providers what strain the patient has: is it the pandemic 2009 H1N1 strain of influenza A, influenza B, or another seasonal strain of influenza A? So far this season, the Public Health Laboratory has analyzed more than 250 specimens for influenza.

Disease Detectives
Prevention and surveillance can protect many people from the flu, but not everyone. That’s when the Communicable Disease Unit steps in. Medical providers are required to report Intensive Care Unit hospital admissions and fatalities due to influenza among patients under the age of 65 years. Communicable Disease nurses act like ‘disease detectives,’ uncovering clues about what might have made certain individuals more susceptible to severe complications from influenza. This information is used to target high-risk groups for prevention efforts. When outbreaks of influenza occur at locations such as skilled nursing facilities, an epidemiologist and public health nurse visit to collect specimens, recommend infection control measures, and monitor for additional cases.
Pajaro Park Gets Its Official Opening

There are few events in Monterey County that draw a thousand people in one afternoon, but that was the estimated crowd size for a special event this past weekend. Was it the Jazz Festival? Concours d’Elegance? No, it was the ribbon cutting and kick-off event for the long awaited Pajaro Neighborhood Park, a recently completed County redevelopment project built in collaboration with community partners.

County Supervisors and staff involved in the park’s creation came out to enjoy the day. The opening event featured a resource fair, music, dancing and a blessing of the park.

The park boasts a three-acre synthetic-turf sports field, a basketball court, two small playgrounds, picnic and barbecue areas, and a 40-foot diameter pavilion.

The park includes special touches from local organizations such as artwork created by students with the Arts Council for Monterey County and landscaping assistance provided by Boy Scout Troop 505 of Pajaro.

The park cost $6.2 million to build, thanks to a combination of redevelopment and grant funding.

More than a thousand people turned out to enjoy the new park. Some took cover from the sunny weather (above) while others cut loose in the colorful children’s play area (left).
Saint Patrick’s Day in county offices at the Government Center in Salinas turned out to be quite green this year: there were green clothes to be seen, green food to be eaten and lots of green, er, money earned for charity.

The Auditor-Controller’s Office staff held its yearly St. Patty’s Day Salad Bar on Monday, March 17th. This is a fundraiser put on by the staff in support of Relay for Life. The lengthy and impressive salad bar had more than two dozen selections, something for everyone. There was plenty of green here, complimented by fruits and vegetables of other colors.

Salad eaters raised $576.00 in lunch ticket sales; another $128.00 was raised through opportunity drawings, for a grand total of $704.00 earned for Relay for Life.

The lore of St. Patrick’s Day is to wear green to mark the Irish heritage of St. Patrick. Staff members from the Treasurer-Tax Collector’s Office may have little or no Irish blood in their veins, but that did not stop them from wearing a dazzling display of green on March 17th.

The Treasurer-Tax Collector’s Office staff is always game for a costume call, so green was the color of the day. While the style included a penchant for headwear attributed to the mythical ‘little people,’ the color was certainly appropriate for a department that takes in a lot of ‘green,’ as in revenue, for the County.