Allegan County Health Department
Emergency Preparedness
Pandemic Influenza Fact Sheet

- **What is pandemic flu?** An influenza pandemic occurs when a new strain of influenza virus emerges, spreading around the world & infecting many people at once. An influenza virus capable of causing a pandemic is one that people do not have natural immunity to, can easily spread from person to person, & is capable of causing severe disease. There were three influenza pandemics in the last century; viruses containing a combination of genes from a human influenza virus & an avian influenza virus caused them. Influenza is a viral infection of the lungs. There are two main types of influenza virus, A & B. Each type includes many different strains & new strains periodically emerge. Influenza outbreaks occur most often in late fall & winter. Pandemic influenza is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza A virus appears in humans, causes serious illness & then spreads easily from person to person worldwide.

- **What is the difference between a pandemic & a seasonal outbreak of flu?** A pandemic is caused by a new influenza A virus that most people have never been exposed to, so everyone is susceptible. Pandemic strains also often cause disease that is more serious. Because of this, past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption & economic loss. Seasonal outbreaks of flu are caused by strains of influenza virus similar to those of past years.

- **How likely is influenza pandemic?** It was predicted an influenza pandemic would occur again as in the case of influenza A (H1N1). This new virus is mild at this point in comparison to other past pandemic influenza surges. Signs of influenza A (H1N1) are "flu-like", including fever, cough, headache, muscle and joint pain, sore throat and runny nose, and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. The new influenza A (H1N1) appears to be as contagious as seasonal influenza, and is spreading fast particularly among young people (from ages 10 to 45). The severity of the disease ranges from very mild symptoms to severe illnesses that can result in death. The majority of people who contract the virus experience the milder disease and recover without antiviral treatment or medical care. Of the more serious cases, more than half of hospitalized people had underlying health conditions or weak immune systems. There is a concern H1N1 could change and become more infectious and virulent. Another concern is the H5N1

avian influenza virus could become a pandemic influenza virus, if this virus combines with a human influenza virus.

- **What can I expect if pandemic influenza surges?** Public Health Agencies are working with other organizations and healthcare facilities to respond to pandemic influenza & to maintain essential governmental services, if an outbreak occurs. Currently, The World Health Organization (WHO) placed a PHASE 6 alert for influenza A (H1N1); this phase require implementation of contingency plans for health systems at all levels. In the case of Influenza A (H1N1), the pandemic designation refers to the spread of a disease -- not its severity.

- **How to minimize the risk of pandemic influenza?** A person infected with influenza virus can be contagious for 24 hours before the onset of symptoms & for seven days thereafter, making it extremely easy for the virus to spread rapidly to large number of people.

  Prevention measures include:
  - Cover your nose & mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
  - Wash hands thoroughly & often; and/or frequently use liquid sanitizers.
  - Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth.
  - Practice social distancing of at least six feet in areas or situations of risk.
  - Stay home when you are sick.
  - Avoid contact with people known to have the "flu" or appear to have a respiratory illness.
  - Currently there is no vaccine for influenza A (H1N1); there is a vaccine in development. A new vaccine takes five to six months to develop.

- **What should I do to prepare for a pandemic influenza?**
  - Take time to stock food, water & other supplies for least two weeks. This preparedness step is a standard policy for all natural and manmade emergencies.

Learn more & stay informed; find more information on www.pandemicflu.gov