



IMMUNIZE KANSAS KIDS

Focused effort started to boost childhood immunization in Kansas

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– *Roderick Bremby, KDHE Secretary*

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Partnership formed to research barriers to improvement and develop action plan

TOPEKA, Kan. — The Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the Kansas Health Institute today announced the launch of the “Immunize Kansas Kids” project. The announcement was made at the initial meeting of a steering committee that will guide the multi-year project, which is being funded by the Kansas Health Foundation.

The steering committee includes representatives from state agencies and several statewide organizations dedicated to improving the health of Kansas children.

“This unique partnership will be invaluable to our ongoing effort to make certain that Kansas children are given every opportunity to succeed by getting the timely immunizations they need to be healthy,” said KDHE Secretary Roderick L. Bremby.

In 2004, the most recent year for which National Immunization Survey data are available, Kansas ranked 43rd among the states in administering a standard vaccination series to children on time. Called the 4:3:1:3:3 series by health providers, the series includes shots to protect children from diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B and some types of meningitis.

The Kansas immunization rate of 77.5 percent fell short of the national average of 80.9 percent and the 90 percent goal sought by Kansas and other states participating in Healthy People 2010, a national health promotion and disease prevention initiative. A 90 percent immunization rate effectively protects the population through a mechanism known as herd immunity.

“The first goal of the partnership is to complete a set of fast, focused studies to better understand the reasons our vaccination rate lags behind that of other states,” said Gianfranco Pezzino, KHI director of public health studies. “Once we know what the barriers to improvement are and what is causing them, we can develop an action plan to overcome them.”

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A report commissioned by the Immunize Kansas Kids project, “The 90 Percent Solution: Raising Vaccination Rates for Kansas Children,” suggested several factors are conspiring to keep immunization rates lower in Kansas. Of particular concern is the fact that compared to their peers in other states a high percentage of Kansas physicians don’t provide vaccinations, relying instead on local health departments to deliver immunization services. Providing more children with vaccinations in their medical homes could boost immunization rates, the report said.

Funding issues, a pattern of children receiving some vaccinations late and the lack of a fully developed immunization registry are among the other factors holding rates down, according to the report.

An immunization registry is a computerized record-keeping system that also generates reminders to help parents keep their children on schedule. Kansas first began working on its immunization registry in 1994. A new registry was launched in 2005 and is being deployed.

Richard Hoffman, the author of “The 90 Percent Solution” and a former epidemiologist for the state of Colorado, said additional studies are needed before targeted solutions can be crafted to the problems hindering the system.

“Information gleaned from such studies could provide a strong basis for recruiting more private-sector providers to give immunizations, and it may be possible to remove remaining financial barriers to administering immunizations on schedule,” Hoffman wrote.

Hoffman’s findings mirrored those of a blue ribbon task force convened in 2003 by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius. KDHE has implemented the following recommendations contained in a report issued by the task force:

- Expanded the KSWebIZ immunization registry, which now contains records for more than 526,000 individuals and more than 1.6 million vaccinations. The immunization registry is operational in 22 of the state’s 99 local health departments with work underway on technical issues that so far have prevented many of the remaining health departments from linking to the system. The registry also is operational in 12 private providers’ offices.
- Revised the immunization schedule to increase the likelihood that children will get the final vaccination in the standard series on time.
- Instituted the Immunize and Win a Prize program first on a pilot basis, then statewide to boost participation among low-income children covered by the Medicaid program.
- Provided immunizations in conjunction with the Women, Infants and Children program, a federally funded health and nutrition program operated by local health departments for low-income women and their children.

“Initiatives that produce short-term improvements in rates are important,” said KHI’s Pezzino. “But only by making changes in what is now a fragmented immunization system can we build on those successes and sustain them.”

“We must take advantage of this opportunity to work together to fundamentally improve our immunization system,” Secretary Bremby added. “Our goal should not only be building a system capable of getting us to the Healthy People 2010 goal but one capable of keeping us there.”