

Keeping Children and Teens Home with the Flu: An Innovative Communication Tool for Parents and Caregivers

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The 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak this past spring revealed many challenges for local health departments (LHDs) such as how to effectively communicate key health messages about how to prevent flu transmission, what to do when someone is sick, and when to seek medical care. In addition, as local health officials transitioned from closing schools where probable cases of H1N1 flu were present to keeping schools open—there was a significant need for highly effective communication tools and guidance for parents and caregivers. However, many LHDs had insufficient tools at hand to meet this need.

King County, Washington (much like other parts of the country), saw a significant influx of parents seeking guidance on how to protect their children from the flu. These caregivers felt unprepared to deal with either the consequences of school closures or knowing the triggers for when it was necessary to keep children home. This dilemma resulted in a burdensome demand on the healthcare system with requests for guidance from caregivers, healthcare providers, schools, and childcare providers.

For the Seattle & King County Public Health Department, also the home of one of NACCHO's

Advanced Practice Centers (APC), the lessons learned from the initial spring wave of the novel H1N1 influenza virus led to the creation of a new communication tool. The goal was to develop a resource for parents and caregivers that would provide actionable steps on how to determine when to keep sick kids home from school or childcare and when to seek medical care. The value of having such a tool was enhanced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) revised infection control guidance released this past summer which reiterated the importance of keeping sick children out of school and childcare facilities to minimize the spread of disease. It was also deemed important to develop a tool that would be user-friendly and meaningful to a diverse audience including those from various ethnic and socio-economic groups, to those with limited-English proficiency or low literacy levels.

Building on the success of the Seattle & King County APC's comic book, [No Ordinary Flu](#), we created a new two-page comic book called [Home with Flu](#) that provides helpful information on when to keep children and teens at home. This tool leverages the power of the comic medium by communicating through the use of pictures in combination with shorter text blocks to present critical information. The visual format used in this comic book engages readers on an emotional level



and helps people to personalize the information. It was also found that using a comic-type format makes the conditions of the H1N1flu outbreak more real and tangible. The format of *Home with Flu* helped us to enhance our message regarding the importance of keeping children home and limiting their social interactions by providing a visual and narrative representation of parents and caregivers solving problems together and taking actionable steps toward providing alternate childcare solutions.

Home with Flu is now available in 14 languages and is finding its way outside the Seattle area. Health departments in the Washington State counties of Spokane, Kitsap, Snohomish, and Benton Franklin have found this resource instrumental in their efforts to educate the community about this influenza virus and many more communities across the nation are likely to benefit from this tool as well.