Boston Public Health Commission, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, and Walgreens partner to launch first-ever "Vaccinate Boston Week" for influenza season

Media campaign will encourage residents to get vaccinated at free clinics around city

Boston — December 6, 2013 — The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC), in partnership with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts and Walgreens, is making a concerted push to vaccinate residents against influenza this month, a time when flu activity can peak in Boston. Supported by a donation from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, which in part will fund free vaccinations for children, and 2,500 vouchers for free vaccinations for adults from Walgreens, the effort will be underscored by a media campaign during the month of December.

BPHC has worked with all community health centers and teaching hospitals to arrange free walk-in clinics across Boston next week, December 8th-14th. Vaccinate Boston Week coincides with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Influenza Vaccination Week. A calendar of free flu clinics is available online at www.bphc.org/flu.

"We want to remind people that this is the perfect time to get your flu vaccine and protect yourself and your loved ones over the holidays," said Dr. Barbara Ferrer, Executive Director of BPHC. "Thanks to the generous support of Blue Cross Blue Shield and Walgreens, we're able to offer thousands of free vaccines to folks who might otherwise not be able to afford it. Flu season is unpredictable, and we saw how severe last year's was. Getting vaccinated gives you the best chance of staying healthy this winter."

Last January, Mayor Thomas M. Menino declared a public health emergency for a flu epidemic that saw nearly 1,600 residents become ill, compared to just 70 cases the previous season. In response, BPHC worked with community health centers to organize 24 free clinics that vaccinated over 7,500 people in just three days.

As of yesterday, there were 26 confirmed cases of influenza among Boston residents. This is similar to the number of cases seen at this time last year. Given how severe last flu season became, it is possible that cases could once again skyrocket over the coming weeks. Health officials hope that Vaccinate Boston Week will help to dampen the spread of illness by encouraging more people to get vaccinated.

The media campaign will be concentrated in areas of the city that traditionally experience higher than average rates of influenza like illness, such as Mattapan, Roxbury, and Dorchester. Posters advertising the importance and availability of flu vaccines will be visible on MBTA buses and bus stops, billboards, and at movie theaters throughout the city. BPHC is also coordinating with several city agencies, community-based organizations, and partners in the health care sector to raise awareness about the importance of getting a flu vaccine.

"Vaccinations are the best prevention we have for the flu, and getting one is an easy, safe and effective way for families and loved ones to stay healthy " said Dr. Tom Hawkins, a Medical Director for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. " It's never too late in the season to get immunized and prevent unnecessary illness this flu season."

"Vaccinate Boston represents a true collaboration between public and private partners all working together to improve the immunization rates in the city of Boston," said Steve Pashko R.Ph., Market Pharmacy Director for Walgreens. "We need to remind folks that it is not too late to get a flu shot next week."

Residents seeking a flu shot voucher from Walgreens are encouraged to call the Mayor's Health Line at 617-534-5050 for more information. While the Walgreens vouchers are only redeemable for adults over the age of 18, other clinics across Boston are offering free vaccines to people of all ages. The flu vaccine is recommended for everyone six months of age and older.

Certain populations, including the elderly, young children, pregnant women, and people with underlying health conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, are at greater risk of becoming seriously ill if they contract the flu. Others that might not be at risk for severe illness themselves can still transmit the infection to vulnerable people.

Health officials suggest the following tips to avoid getting sick or spreading germs:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds, especially after coughing or sneezing. If water is not nearby, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs can spread easily this way.
- As much as possible, avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- If you have a fever or feel ill, stay home.

About Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (http://www.bluecrossma.com) is a community-focused, tax-paying, not-for-profit health plan headquartered in Boston. We are committed to working with others in a spirit of shared responsibility to make quality health care affordable. Consistent with our corporate promise to always put our 2.8 million members first, we are rated among the nation's best health plans for member satisfaction and quality. BCBSMA also has a strong commitment to the community. In 2012 alone, more than 3,000 of our associates contributed more than 26,600 volunteer service hours to nonprofit organizations across the Commonwealth, the company contributed more than $1.6 billion to the Massachusetts economy and

gave nearly $6.3 million in philanthropic contributions to 560 nonprofit organizations. To learn more about BCBSMA's Corporate Citizenship efforts, visit BlueCrew @ Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusettson Facebook or our annual Corporate Citizenship Report.

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