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Addressing the rising rates of respiratory syncytial virus

Over the past few weeks, physicians across the country have reported unseasonably high rates of pediatric respiratory illnesses. Specifically, a sharp increase of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) has flooded hospitals nationwide with pediatric patients. Children’s hospitals across the east coast are near capacity, and many are not seeing any signs of the spread slowing down. Connecticut Children’s Hospital has even sought the assistance of the National Guard and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help expand bed capacity. In Los Angeles County, the positivity rate for RSV tests has nearly doubled over the last three weeks, and many hospitals are beginning to report capacity strains.

While RSV is a common infection, and is mild in most cases, it can lead to severe complications and symptoms, and even be life-threatening, for infants, young adults and adults older than 65 years. Specifically, children under 12 months of age are most at risk, and many experts attribute this year’s surge to the fact that most young children have not developed the necessary biological defenses to fight off this virus due to not being exposed to other circulating viruses.

Each year, approximately 58,000 children under five are infected with RSV, and up to 500 children under five die from RSV. Furthermore, there is concern about stress on our healthcare system with anticipated increases in COVID and influenza cases this fall while RSV is increasing. While there is no vaccine for RSV, some medical experts have advised that getting the flu vaccine could ease RSV symptoms.

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Throughout the last three years, the Department of Public Health (DPH) has built out a robust platform to share information and track data of communicable diseases. They have also leveraged strong relationships with our regional healthcare system to develop a feedback loop to ensure the public had real-time information on the health risks in their communities. Public Health has communicated with healthcare providers about RSV and other respiratory illnesses to encourage patients to receive influenza and COVID-19 vaccines this fall to protect themselves against respiratory viruses this season. Parents and caregivers are also encouraged to keep young children with respiratory illnesses out of childcare, even if they have tested negative for COVID. We need to amplify messaging about these protective actions to a broader audience to ensure we are taking the steps to protect our communities and our healthcare system.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Direct the Department of Public Health to work with Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), community service providers and other partners to develop multilingual and culturally competent messaging for parents, families, and caregivers on the risks of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), best practices and precautions to take to protect infants, children, and other vulnerable populations from RSV, and when to seek additional treatment or hospitalization, and report back to the board with a status update in 60 days;
2. Direct the Department of Public Health, in coordination with Board offices, professional organizations, medical providers and community partners, to amplify messaging about the importance of receiving childhood vaccinations for vaccine preventable diseases; and
3. Direct Department of Public Health to consult with the Department of Health Services and private hospitals, on pediatric RSV case and hospitalization level data, and any developing stress on the system from RSV pediatric patients, and report back to the board with a status update in 60 days.

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