

**HEALTH**

# FLU SEASON MAY HIT HARD, EARLY



DAVID GOLDMAN — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A nurse prepares a flu shot at the Salvation Army in Atlanta.

**Santa Cruz County:** Health officials work to reach low income, underinsured groups

**By Ashleigh Papp**  
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**SANTA CRUZ** » “Do I need to get one each year?” asked Jaime Lopez in Spanish, while seated in a custom-built health clinic on wheels parked in a church parking lot in downtown Santa Cruz. “It’s up to you,” replied Ester Eustos, Lopez’ nurse. “The type of flu changes each year, so it’s better to get your flu shot annually, but you’ll be better protected by getting one this year.”

Lopez’s hesitance remained, so he asked a few more questions — about the side effects, consequences of getting sick with the flu, and naturally, how sore his arm would be after the in-

jection. After talking it over with Eustos, Lopez decided it was a good idea for him and the health of his family to get vaccinated. He signed the consent form and rolled up his shirt sleeve.

Lopez is a Santa Cruz resident without health insurance, and like many in the county without adequate health coverage, it means there are few options to learn about the flu vaccine and opt into receiving it. A disparity in flu vaccination coverage in Santa Cruz County may leave pockets of unvaccinated groups vulnerable — health care workers are trying to close that gap this 2019-20 influenza season.

At a national level, stud- **FLU** » PAGE 5

**Nation:** Season off to earliest start in more than 15 years as illness spreads in South

**By Mike Stobbe**  
*The Associated Press*

**NEW YORK** » The U.S. winter flu season is off to its earliest start in more than 15 years.

An early barrage of illness in the South has begun to spread more broadly, and there’s a decent chance flu season could peak much earlier than normal, health officials say.

The last flu season to rev up this early was in 2003-2004 — a bad one. Some experts think the early start may mean a lot of suffering is in store, but others say it’s too early to tell.

“It really depends on what viruses are circulating. There’s not a predictable trend as far as if it’s

early it’s going to be more severe, or later, less severe,” said Scott Epperson, who tracks flu-like illnesses for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There are different types of flu viruses, and the one causing illnesses in most parts of the country is a surprise. It’s a version that normally doesn’t abound until March or April.

That virus generally isn’t as dangerous to older people — good news, since most flu hospitalizations and deaths each winter occur in the elderly. However, such viruses can be hard on children and people younger than 50.

Louisiana was the first state to really get hit hard, **VIRUS** » PAGE 5

# Flu

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ies show that only a quarter of adults earning less than \$10,000 were vaccinated in the 2018-19 flu season, compared to other ethnicities. And across ethnic groups in the country, the adult Hispanic population was the lowest vaccinated.

In Santa Cruz County, about 8.4% of families live below the federal poverty level and the adult Hispanic population are the lowest insured. Although exact numbers of flu vaccination coverage at a county level are not available, a trend similar to the national levels between income and ethnic disparities in flu vaccine coverage seems likely, according to the county's Public Health Office.

To combat the disparity locally, Santa Cruz County public health officials are working with health organizations to address the likely gaps in flu vaccination rates. For those without insurance or only minimal coverage plans, state government funded Safety Net Clinics exist throughout the county, and offer flu vaccines in the months leading up to the winter season. To reach more children and their families, these clinics have also established flu vaccine programs at some schools.

And to reach those without insurance or an aversion to clinics, the county partners with the Dominican Mobile Wellness Clinic to bring preventative health care and flu vaccines to underserved groups. Each week, the mobile clinic visits three to five sites throughout the county, offering free health care to anyone in need, flu vaccines included.

During the 2018-19 flu

season, the mobile clinic administered about 200 vaccines to working adults, who comprise the majority of their patient base. Like the conversation between Lopez and Eustos, this clinic's goal is to reduce hospital visits through educating patients about common illnesses and preventative medicine.

"A lot of the patients we see lack a basic education about the flu vaccine," said Rachel Ruby, a nurse practitioner with the Mobile Wellness Clinic. Most patients don't understand what the flu vaccine is or the possible consequences of contracting the flu, she explained. Without it the chances a patient and their family might get infected increase, which could mean time off from work, school and income lost.

Many factors could influence a patient's decision to get vaccinated, said Amy Mitchell Meza, a supervising public health nurse for Santa Cruz County. Meza worked with the state to secure roughly 5,000 flu vaccines for the 2019-20 flu season. The vaccines are distributed to facilities throughout the county, such as Safety Net Clinics and the mobile wellness clinic, to help protect individuals as well as the larger community.

In recent years, nurse practitioner Ruby has noticed a shift in the type of clients visiting the mobile wellness clinic. Once frequented by middle-aged working class who couldn't get health insurance due to existing conditions, the clinic now serves seasonal workers in areas such as Watsonville and Davenport and service workers in downtown Santa Cruz. Immigrants in the country illegally now make up half of the patients that even-

tually receive flu vaccines from the Dominican Mobile Wellness Clinic, Ruby said.

When a patient sits down in the mobile clinic, they're asked a series of questions — including, "Would you like a flu shot today?" If the answer is "no," then Ruby or another on her team seizes

the opportunity to dig a bit deeper and learn about why the patient hasn't yet been vaccinated for the flu.

"Solving what stands between people and their health during the flu season is totally doable," Ruby said.

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ASHLEIGH PAPP — CONTRIBUTED

The Dominican Mobile Wellness Clinic parked at Our Lady Star of the Sea Church in Santa Cruz on Nov. 19.