Community Immunity: Washington State Report Card
2013

Ensuring timely immunization of our children, adolescents, and adults is critical to protecting not only their health, but the health of our communities. Immunization against disease is widely recognized as one of the most cost-effective and life saving interventions of modern medicine. The Immunization Action Coalition of Washington (IACW) affirms the value, safety and effectiveness of vaccines in preventing serious illness and saving lives. As Washington’s recent pertussis epidemic demonstrates, we are still vulnerable to vaccine-preventable diseases and must maintain a robust immunization program to protect our communities’ health. Therefore, to advance the many successes achieved through immunization and continue to provide our communities with the best protection from vaccine-preventable disease, we have identified seven key policy priorities and evaluated where Washington stands for each of them.

Successes: These parts of our immunization system are robust, successful, and efficient.

**Exemption Policy:** Washington’s school and childcare immunization entry requirements allow for medical, religious, and personal/philosophical exemptions. After the passage of SB5005/HB1015 in 2011, parents who exempt their children on the basis of personal belief must receive education about the risks and benefits of vaccination from a licensed healthcare provider and must include their signature on their exemption form. Already, this legislation has decreased our exemption rates from 6.0% to 4.5%, and further decrease is likely as it is fully implemented in the 2013-2014 school year.

**Childhood Vaccine Financing and Delivery System:** A key component to maintaining high childhood immunization rates is an efficient vaccine delivery system. Washington addressed this in 2010 when a private-public partnership was formed to create the Washington Vaccine Association (WVA). The WVA works with the State Department of Health for the universal purchase of routinely recommended vaccines for all children younger than 19 years old in Washington. This is one of the most efficient and cost effective systems in the country for the purchasing and distribution of childhood vaccines.

Maintain: These parts of our immunization system are currently strong, and need to be maintained in order to remain effective and continue protecting our health.

**Immunization Registry:** Washington’s confidential web-based immunization registry, called Washington State Immunization Information System, houses immunization records for children, adolescents, and adults. Maintaining and advancing this system saves money by ensuring that children receive only the vaccines they need, that children and adults are immunized on time, and that public health has the ability to identify people at risk in the event of a disease outbreak or disaster. In addition, access to the registry in the school setting has saved the resources, time and energy of school staff and nurses by providing the current immunization status of students as required for school entry. The registry could provide additional value by increasing the number of providers using it to track adult immunizations, including pharmacies.
**Educating Healthcare Providers and the Public:** Provider education and training is a key strategy for an effective immunization system, including current immunization practice and recommendations and technical assistance for use of the registry and working with parents. In Washington, there are many parents opting out of recommended immunizations for their infants and toddlers based on fears of adverse reactions for which there is no credible scientific evidence. Public education that markets the value of immunizations and the importance of community immunity directly to parents is critical. VaxNorthwest is a private-public partnership that focuses on increasing immunizations and reducing vaccine hesitancy through tools for healthcare providers and direct community engagement with parents. It is essential that resources, including financial resources, from diverse partners is available to continue these critical activities.

**Improve:** These components of our immunization system are or may be changing soon, and we need to ensure that they have the resources to be effective.

**Adult Vaccine Financing and Delivery System:** There is no adult counterpart to the WVA, leaving a gap in the community’s protection from disease. The public health sector has only a minimal role in purchasing adult vaccines. Adult vaccines are largely purchased in the private sector under a fee-for-service system in which the provider purchases vaccines up front and bills the patient or third-party payer such as an insurance plan or Medicare. Although implementation of the Affordable Care Act is expected to increase the number of adults who are insured and the number of insurance plans that cover adult immunizations, gaps will remain, especially for the most vulnerable. We must continue to work to remove barriers to accessing vaccines for adults.

**Cost of Administering Vaccines:** Currently, the Medicaid reimbursement for providers in Washington is one of the lowest in the nation, and providers are assuming part of the costs associated with vaccinating Medicaid-covered children. This rate will increase from 2013-2014 because of the Affordable Care Act, but we must ensure that it does not decrease again after this time period. Otherwise, these costs create barriers to increasing immunization rates.

**Quality Assurance:** A quality improvement strategy is required by the Federal Immunization Program through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The goal is to improve standards of practice and raise immunization coverage levels through the use of provider assessment (AFIX) which is done by state and local health jurisdiction staff. Currently, only about 30% of Washington’s Vaccines for Children providers receive an AFIX visit each year. Continuation of this assessment system is necessary to ensure quality immunization practice. Federal funding is used for this effort and if more funds become available the percentage of annual provider visits can increase. State and local public health share a critical role regarding the development of activities and recommendations for quality assurance and improvement in the system.

Quality improvement is also required by health plans participating in the new benefits exchange established by the Affordable Care Act. Immunization coverage rates among health plan and provider patients can and should be used as quality indicators in these efforts. The existing statewide immunization registry offers a readily available, easy to use way to record and monitor immunizations.

For more information contact:
Ginny Heller, MSW
Immunization Program Manager
(206) 830-5168
ginnyh@withinreachwa.org
www.immunizewa.org