



JTF-HD Press Release
Release #: 2011-35
Darrell D. Ames, Public Affairs Officer
darrell.ames@us.army.mil
(808) 438-5853

Joint Task Force Homeland Defense continues practice of providing flu vaccine to pacific partners

By JTF-HD Public Affairs

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 11, 2011

Fort Shafter, HAWAII – “Recognizing the need for the program was as simple as putting A and B together,” said Mr. Mel Garcia, Deputy J-3 for Joint Task Force Homeland Defense (JTF-HD). The program Mr. Garcia refers to is the distribution of excess influenza vaccine to people in need. “The program actually began back in 2007,” Garcia said. “There was a great need for the vaccine and the Department of Defense (DoD) had nearly 8,000 excess doses so we shipped them off to the Northern Mariana Islands.”

The program, referred to as the ‘United States/Pacific Islands Vaccine Program’, originated during the 2006-2007 flu season in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) when JTF-HD discovered, through their Pandemic Influenza Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE) program, that many of their pacific partners were experiencing a vaccine shortfall.

“All parties concerned were very fortunate to discover that both the need and surplus existed,” said Army Col. Fred Chesbro, JTF-HD J-3. “Prior to this cooperation I believe the excess DoD flu vaccine was simply being destroyed,” said Chesbro.

As is the case this year, both Continental and Hawaiian Airlines have provided delivery of the vaccine to JTF-HD's partners in the Pacific since the program's inception, at no cost. "This collaborative effort is expected to benefit tens of thousands of Pacific Islanders over millions of square miles," said Garcia. In fact, since the beginning of the program there has only been one season (2008-2009) when the Pacific partners did not experience a vaccine shortfall.

"The flu season in the United States generally runs from October through May," said Army Lt. Col. Robin Lau, JTF-HD Deputy Operations Officer. "By February DoD knows how much excess flu vaccine is available and is able to deliver by the end of March. That gives our partners almost three months to administer the vaccine before its expiration date," Lau said. The Pacific islands do not have a set flu season so the benefits of the flu vaccine are wide-sweeping and can be utilized year round.

In the U.S. alone, seasonal influenza kills approximately 36,000 Americans on average each year. The victims are primarily infants and the elderly. This ongoing partnership between JTF-HD, the Army, local airlines and other federal and non-governmental agencies yields the DoD's entire stock of excess seasonal influenza vaccinations to benefit the U.S.-affiliated islands in the Pacific.

Each shipment represents a year's worth of collaboration between a number of agencies to deliver the excess vaccines to different jurisdictions in the Pacific. "This enables Pacific Islanders to be immunized against influenza, which is a year-round disease in the tropics," said Garcia. Receiving the flu shot protects not only the recipient, but also all those people who work closely or live with the vaccine recipient, extending the benefit of the vaccines beyond the actual number of doses shipped.

“The DoD uses the influenza vaccine in order to protect beneficiaries against a virus,” said Lau. “The vaccination is mandatory for active duty and recommended for all beneficiaries eligible to receive it, such as family members and some civilians,” Lau said. As a result DoD would end up with excess doses that were being destroyed at the end of the flu season or when the vaccine expired. The resources of the collective interagency partnership enables JTF-HD to assist large populations of their neighbors in the Pacific.

"Often times these islands only have a small amount of doses to give out to the local population each year, so these extra vaccinations from the U.S. military will afford more people with protection against this particular virus," said Ron Ballajadia, Pacific Islands Health Officers Association.

Hawaii's Tripler Army Medical Center (TAMC) collects the excess vaccines throughout the entire DoD, with help from various military medical treatment facilities on the mainland. Military Vaccine Agency Hawaii coordinates receipt of the shipment at Tripler's warehouses and maintains quality control. Each nation's embassy, in conjunction with their Ministry of Health, requests and arranges receipt of the shipment to their respective islands.

In previous years the vaccine has made its way over 5,000 miles of the Pacific Ocean, to Guam, American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, and other small Pacific islands, to donate the surplus doses of seasonal influenza vaccine that would otherwise have been discarded.

While the flu season is over in the United States, influenza is a year-round contagious disease in the tropics. The Pacific Island Health Officers Association, comprised of the chief health officers of the various islands, determines how the vaccines will be distributed in their respective islands. The U.S. Army Medical Materiel Agency and the Military Vaccine Agency help coordinate and ship the surplus vaccines from military treatment facilities nationwide to Tripler, where the project is managed by Tripler's logistics division and preventive medicine department.

Headquartered at Fort Shafer, Hawaii, JTF-HD's mission is to execute domestic Land Domain operations, in close coordination, with civil authorities, to defeat terrorist threats to the U.S. Homeland (defined as the U.S. States and Territories, Possessions, Commonwealths; and Compact Nations in the Pacific), and when requested/validated, to conduct civil support [Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) or Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA)] operations for all hazards including responding to, and recovering from, natural or man-made disasters across the Pacific.

- 30 -

(For additional information and/or clarification contact JTF-HD at (808) 438-5853.)