

National Adult Immunization SUMMIT

Draft-Adult Vaccination: What Works

Name of the Organization:

Rhode Island Flu Task Force

What We Did:

After months of careful study and deliberation, the Rhode Island Department of Health enacted one of the country's broadest, most ambitious measures to ensure the vaccination of healthcare workers against influenza in October 2012. The measure, in the form of a regulation change, requires healthcare workers in the state to either be vaccinated against influenza annually, or to wear surgical masks when engaged in direct patient contact during periods of widespread influenza in Rhode Island.

Despite free vaccine and aggressive outreach efforts to educate and promote influenza vaccination among healthcare workers, the influenza vaccination rate of Rhode Island healthcare providers has languished around 65% for years. At meeting after meeting of the Rhode Island Flu Task Force, the same question was asked: Why should Rhode Islanders trust the influenza vaccination recommendations of their healthcare providers when healthcare providers themselves are not being vaccinated against influenza?

The Rhode Island Force, consisting of 50 members including the Rhode Island Department of Health, worked in a careful step-by-step fashion to explore the issue of influenza vaccination regulations for healthcare workers in this state. Activities included routine meetings, holding public hearings, sharing of best practices, and data sharing. Other activities taken on by members of the Rhode Island Flu Task Force included testifying in favor of the mandate at public hearings; helping design tools for healthcare facilities to report on the vaccination rates of their employees; and helping to create healthcare worker education material related to the mandate. Public opposition was present from the moment that feedback was solicited regarding the immunization mandate. Members of the Task Force addressed this opposition in various venues.

Outcome or Results We Got:

Preliminary data reveal that this vaccination mandate resulted in a 22% increase in the immunization rate of healthcare workers in Rhode Island from the previous influenza season, a truly astounding feat (65% vs. 87%). Additionally, the considerable news media coverage about influenza vaccination that was generated by this groundbreaking mandate contributed to an overall increase in the statewide influenza vaccination rate of approximately 10%.

A key component of the regulation was the "masking component," which required unvaccinated healthcare workers to wear surgical masks when at their facilities.

From some reports, the masking requirement played a key role in increasing immunization rates.

About Our Organization:

Formed in August 2011, by Director of Health Michael Fine, MD, the Rhode Island Flu Task Force is composed of approximately 50 members. They include epidemiologists, physicians, nurses, public health professionals, pharmacists, insurers, college and university personnel, nursing home staff, and healthcare facility administrators. The group was initially charged with identifying barriers and improving access to influenza vaccine for all Rhode Islanders. However, their focus soon turned to the immunization rates of healthcare workers.