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CARING FOR NEW MEXICO

CATHERINE D. TORRES, M.D., CABINET SECRETARY

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Secretary Catherine Torres, M.D.

For Immediate Release  
September 9, 2011

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### **The Department of Health Responds to Contagion**

Warner Bros. feature film “Contagion” will be released on Friday, September 9, 2011. The movie portrays a fast-moving epidemic of a lethal airborne virus. While this movie depicts a fictitious account of an outbreak, it draws from real-life experiences at state health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As in the movie, the New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) stands ready to respond to outbreaks and emergencies 24/7. This is accomplished through the rapid detection of the disease organism, a clear understanding of how it is transmitted, and, what is needed to stop ongoing transmission---antibiotics, vaccines, or isolation and quarantine.

The DOH has a cadre of trained epidemiologists, laboratory scientists, doctors, public health nurses, and environmental scientists capable of responding to existing or new and emerging threats.

“The Department of Health has invested heavily over many years in emergency preparedness and outbreak response capability utilizing CDC and other federal funds,” said Dr. Catherine Torres, Cabinet Secretary for the DOH. “Since September 11, 2001, we have built effective epidemiology, laboratory, and information systems, as well as other important response capabilities.”

Dr. Torres elaborated on the need to develop and maintain disease surveillance systems including: electronic disease and laboratory reporting, newer and faster laboratory detection methods, and improved planning at state, regional, and local levels. She urges individuals to protect themselves against the spread of germs by:

- Practicing good hand washing techniques
- Covering your mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing
- Staying home when you’re sick

The DOH’s systems were tested with the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic and many lessons were learned in responding to this new pandemic virus. While the H1N1 pandemic was much milder than had been feared, the initial response assumed the worst and preparations were in place to react to the possibility of a 1918-like pandemic. To respond to this situation, the state laboratory worked with CDC to rapidly implement laboratory testing for the new influenza virus. The DOH’s epidemiologists implemented tracking for illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths due to



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H1N1 influenza. Public health nurses worked alongside the healthcare providers in the private sector to deliver vaccine once it became available.

In the last 20 years, DOH staff has investigated numerous outbreaks of local and national significance. In 1993, an unusual, rapidly progressive illness that was subsequently identified as a newly recognized hantavirus caused an outbreak in the four corners. In 1995, the state experienced a meningitis outbreak centered near Cuba, NM. Several large food borne outbreaks of salmonella and E. coli involving cases nationally were initially recognized in New Mexico.

For more information on emergency preparedness, visit the NMDOH's website at <http://nmhealth.org/HEM/index.shtml>.

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