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Air Force Adds Kids to Pentagon's Mandatory H1N1 Vaccine Program

by: *Allen McDuffee, truthout* | Report

About 25,000 children in on-base Air Force daycare centers will be forced to receive the H1N1 vaccine or face being barred from school, Truthout has learned following reports from concerned parents.

When a number of Air Force parents opened the November Child Development Center newsletter, they were outraged to learn that their children must receive the H1N1 vaccine. The newsletter article indicates that the Air Force is considering the H1N1 vaccine as part of the required seasonal flu vaccination.

The notification states:

Recently we received guidance from AF regarding the H1N1 vaccination. AF is considering the H1N1 vaccine as part of the required flu immunization. So, all children participating in AF programs must have the H1N1 vaccination as it becomes available. We are currently working w/ Public Health & the Immunization Clinic to provide on-site opportunities for your children to receive the H1N1 vaccine. There must be a minimum of 18 days between the seasonal mist and the H1N1 mist, so the Child Development Program cannot offer the H1N1 vaccine until mid to late November, since we just completed the seasonal flu vaccination. We will continue to provide you w/ updates as the H1N1 becomes available. Children MUST get this vaccine OR have a medical exemption on file. Please see a member of management if you have any questions or speak w/ your child's pediatrician! We are also coordinating to have members of Public Health available to answer your questions -

stay tuned for more details.

A parent at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL, speaking on condition of anonymity out of concern for reprisal against herself and her husband, was disturbed by the complete lack of confidence and answers from the center's administrators.

"What I got was a lot of 'shoulds.' It 'should' be fine. There 'should' be no problems with the vaccine."

"If they're not sure," she said, "why should I be?"

This action follows an already controversial decision from the Pentagon announced in September to make the H1N1 vaccine mandatory in all branches of the military's program. That requirement has been put on hold because the Department of Defense's supplier, Novartis, has not been able to deliver the [vaccine](#).

Last month, New York Governor David Paterson suspended mandatory vaccinations of a half million New York healthcare workers, citing a vaccine shortage. However, others point to lawsuits, protests and a restraining order as pulling equal weight in bringing the program to a halt.

Dr. [Meryl Nass](#), a vaccine expert at Mount Desert Island Hospital in Bar Harbor, Maine, who is critical of the development of the H1N1 vaccine and its surrounding policies, said that although "soldiers are subject to mandatory vaccinations, mandatory medical examinations and potentially even mandatory medical procedures - their families did not sign up for this!"

Additionally, Nass notes, "Children need to be especially protected by society, as they are not competent to make vaccination decisions for themselves. This is why there are special requirements to be met before you can perform research on children. You can't bribe parents to offer their kids as experimental subjects, for example."

But for many Air Force parents, household income levels prevent them from finding a true alternative.

In testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee in June, Eliza Nesmith, Chief of the Airman and Family Services Division of the Air Force, stated that "over 50 percent of Air Force spouses currently work outside the home, and 77 percent wish to work outside the home. Typically, military spouses earn less than their civilian counterparts, even though 7 of 10 have some college education."

Nesmith's testimony highlights the degree to which military parents rely on the on-base child care available to them. Child care in the military is heavily subsidized on a sliding scale according to household income. Thus, parents who rely on the subsidized child care are forced to choose between transferring their children to child care they cannot afford or, at least from their standpoint, putting their children's health at risk.

A spokesperson for the Air Force defended the Air Force's action, citing the Air Force Joint Instruction 48-110: "As a condition of employment or attendance at these facilities, schoolteachers, childcare center workers, volunteers, and children attending DOD-sponsored primary and secondary schools, childcare centers, or similar facilities are administered appropriate vaccines against communicable diseases unless already immune (based on documented receipt of vaccine series or physician-diagnosed illness) or medically/administratively exempt."

Additionally, the Air Force spokesperson said, "For immunization requirements, the Air Force follows the CDC recommendations, which are endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)."

However, while the CDC does recommend the H1N1 vaccine, a CDC spokesperson contradicted the Air Force's rationale for the mandatory vaccine stating, "We have no recommendations for mandatory vaccinations." The FDA, while not a recommendation-issuing body, supports the CDC's voluntary policy.

A spokesman for the Marine Corps said that while they are happy to make the vaccine available to Marine families, they will not be

implementing a mandatory program because their jurisdiction to do so "ends with servicemen and women."

The Army is in the midst of developing an H1N1 guidance memo for its child and youth services facilities. Until it is published, the current policy dictates that parents are asked not to bring sick children to the facilities, and if child care center employees determine a child is sick, parents will be called and asked to pick the child up. However, an Army spokesperson said, "Nothing in our forthcoming guidance will require vaccinations."

For Nass, justifying a decision boils down to one simple fact: "Children are not soldiers."



Allen McDuffee is a two-time fellow at the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism. He writes about politics for publications such as The Nation, Mother Jones and The New York Observer. McDuffee is currently working on a book, "No Child Left Unrecruited," and blogs at [governmentality](#). He lives in Brooklyn, NY.