FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
August 1, 2012

AFFINITY, THEDACARE TEAM UP AGAINST THE FLU
Health Care Systems Ask Employees, Doctors to Get Influenza Vaccine or Wear Masks to Protect Patients

Affinity Health System and ThedaCare are teaming up to help prevent the spread of influenza and upper respiratory diseases in the community.

Both health systems are requiring their employees, volunteers and students to be immunized against influenza. If employees cannot or decide not to receive the vaccine, they will need to wear a mask when interacting with patients, visitors and co-workers during the flu season. All employees showing symptoms of an upper respiratory infection with a fever will be encouraged to stay home. Those with symptoms without a fever will be asked to wear a mask regardless of their vaccination status.

“Our mission is to improve the health of our communities and one way to do that is to stop the spread of the flu to our patients. The best defense against the flu is to get the influenza vaccination,” said Greg Long, MD, chief medical officer for ThedaCare. “By receiving the vaccination, employees will not only protect their health, but also the health of patients and visitors.”

“This is the right thing to do. Our goal is to achieve a vaccination rate of 90 percent or higher to protect our patients, staff and the broader community,” said Mark Kerhberg, MD, chief medical officer for Affinity Health System. “We know that vaccination is one of the best ways of preventing the spread of influenza and keeping our community healthy.”

Getting an annual influenza vaccine is the No. 1 way people can stay healthy during the winter months. Complications of the flu include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and can cause chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes to get worse. In addition, even though flu season is months away, leaders from both healthcare systems are reminding residents to plan to get vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone over the age of six months receive the vaccination each year. The flu virus is mainly spread by droplets made when people with the flu cough, sneeze or talk that land in a nearby person’s nose or mouth.

“By making our new policy public, we hope it demonstrates how important it is to receive the influenza vaccine and everyone will receive it once it becomes available,” Dr. Long said. “The flu is a serious illness causing people to miss school or work for several days. Some people especially the elderly and babies can be hit particularly hard by the illness.”

Information regarding Affinity and ThedaCare’s flu clinics will be released in the early fall.

Dr. Kerhberg said Affinity and ThedaCare met with their employees to gather as many viewpoints as possible and decided against making the vaccination mandatory, which has been done by some other healthcare organizations in the state. “We came up with the alternative of wearing a mask so employees can decide whether or not they want to receive the vaccination,” he said.

If patients have any questions about the new procedure, they can ask their healthcare provider.
Affinity Health System, a faith-based regional health care network, is operated by Ministry Health Care. Affinity Health System is the Fox Valley’s second-largest employer, according to the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce & Industry, and has been nationally listed for two years in a row among the top 50 health systems for quality and efficiency (Thomson Reuters, Modern Healthcare; 2009, 2010). For nine consecutive years, Affinity Health System has been named to the SDI Health (formerly Verispan) Integrated Health Network Top 100, an annual assessment of the 100 most highly integrated health care networks in the nation – Affinity ranks no. 81 in the 2011 report. Both St. Elizabeth Hospital in Appleton and Mercy Medical Center in Oshkosh rank among the top 1 percent of hospitals nationwide in terms of quality and efficiency, as determined by the 2007 Premier | CareScience Select practice National Quality Award. Network Health Plan has achieved Excellent accreditation status from the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA), the highest possible level. It has been nationally ranked in the Top 50 Health Insurance Plans for five consecutive years in the U.S. News and World Report/NCQA Best Health Plans in America listing. Members of Affinity include Mercy Medical Center and Mercy Health Foundation, Oshkosh; St. Elizabeth Hospital and the St. Elizabeth Hospital Foundation, Appleton; Affinity Medical Group, a regional network of 26 family practice and specialty clinics – 23 of which are transforming into medical home models – in 14 communities; Calumet Medical Center, Chilton; Network Health Plan, Menasha; and Affinity Occupational Health.

ThedaCare™ is a community health system consisting of five hospitals: Appleton Medical Center, Theda Clark Medical Center, New London Family Medical Center, Shawano Medical Center, and Riverside Medical Center in Waupaca. ThedaCare also includes ThedaCare Physicians, ThedaCare Behavioral Health, and ThedaCare at Home. ThedaCare is the largest employer in Northeast Wisconsin with more than 6,175 employees. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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