

**CITY OF BALTIMORE**

SHEILA DIXON, Mayor



**HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Baltimore City Health Department Joins With Maryland Hepatitis Coalition to Commemorate Hepatitis Awareness Month**

**BALTIMORE, MD (May 12, 2009)** — Interim Commissioner of Health Olivia D. Farrow joined with members of the Maryland Hepatitis Coalition and state and local officials to recognize national hepatitis awareness month. Free vaccinations were offered to children and at-risk adults as part of an effort to raise awareness of the health risks associated with hepatitis and reducing the spread of this potentially life-threatening disease.

Acute viral hepatitis most frequently is caused by infection with one of three viruses: hepatitis A virus (HAV), hepatitis B virus (HBV), and hepatitis C virus (HCV). Safe and effective vaccines are available for HAV and HBV. No vaccine exists against HCV. Most people become infected with the HCV virus by sharing needles to inject drugs.

“The Health Department actively promotes the prevention of hepatitis and substance abuse and encourages individuals to make healthy lifestyle choices,” said Interim Commissioner Farrow. “Getting young children and at-risk adults vaccinated for hepatitis A and B is an important step in stopping the spread of this endemic disease.”

The HAV vaccine first became available in 1995. In the last decade, Baltimore city has seen a significant drop in confirmed HAV cases – from 94 in 1999, to 4 in 2008. HBV vaccination rates for children age 19 to 35 months in Baltimore City remain historically high – 91 percent in 2006, the most recent data available. The Baltimore City Public Schools system requires students be fully vaccinated for hepatitis B before entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The Health Department’s TIKE van offers free hepatitis immunizations for children and adults who do not have a medical provider. A full schedule is available on our website, [www.baltimorehealth.org/tikeschedule](http://www.baltimorehealth.org/tikeschedule).

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. In chronic cases, it can cause death. HCV is transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids. Most new confirmed cases stem from the sharing of intravenous needles, sex with an infected partner and (less commonly) through blood transfusions.

The Baltimore City Needle Exchange program seeks to reduce HIV, hepatitis C, and other infections by reducing the circulation of unclean syringes. The program provides testing for Syphilis, HIV, and hepatitis C. These services are provided in seventeen locations in the City of Baltimore. See our website for a list of hours and locations.

The MHC is a statewide coalition that advocates for people with hepatitis and works to eliminate hepatitis in Maryland.

For more information about clinical services and Hepatitis Awareness Month activities, please contact Charlene Brown, Chief Medical Officer, at (410) 396-4438, or view our website at [www.baltimorehealth.org](http://www.baltimorehealth.org).

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