By Jan Rahn
Managing Editor

Twenty-five representatives of various entities in Perkins County came together recently to discuss capabilities of the county should the H1N1 pandemic (swine flu) infiltrate the area.

Gathering at the Grant Fire Hall on Aug. 18 was a group of community members comprised of law enforcement, hospital staff, business leaders, city and village representatives and volunteer fire department personnel.

Hosting the tabletop exercise were coordinators from Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) and West Central Medical Response System.

“The prediction of these two federal agencies is that this virus will circulate again this fall in a more virulent form, possibly causing more illness and even death,” said SWNPHD emergency response coordinator Heidi Wheeler in a letter to community leaders inviting them to help plan for this scenario.

The tabletop exercise was held to discuss the capabilities of the county and what gaps may need to be filled if this pandemic does come to Perkins County.

During the presentation by Wheeler and Justin Watson of WCMRS, she said, “School-age children are really on our radar.”

They are working with a committee in Perkins County to plan for receiving and dispensing the H1N1 vaccine which is scheduled for arrival in mid-October.

The group, which is comprised of members from emergency management, schools, hospital, county, fire department and city officials is organized as Community Preparedness Coordination Committee (CPCC).

Perkins County Schools Superintendent Tobin Buchanan has agreed to chair the group. The group does more than just pandemic flu planning, said Wheeler. They will continue to be involved in reaching vulnerable populations, mass fatality planning, and any other emergency and/or disaster that could be a threat to public health.

The H1N1 seems to be infecting children ages 5-18 at a higher rate, which makes Buchanan’s role in chairing the group a perfect fit.

“We will be working with the schools to get children vaccinated and keep them healthy throughout the flu season,” said Wheeler.

The most important public health message to get across involves preventing spread. These guidelines come from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and include:

- Keep kids home if they are sick. Don’t go to work if you are sick.
- Sneeze and cough into crook of arm or tissue and not hand if at all possible.
- Wash hands regularly. Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer often.
- Don’t touch eyes, nose, mouth.

Watch for more information and guidelines in future issues of The Grant Tribune-Sentinel to prevent contracting the swine flu.