

Illinois Schools Authorized To Keep Medication On Hand To Treat Students' Respiratory Distress

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SPRINGFIELD – Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) Director Dr. Sameer Vohra has signed a standing order allowing trained personnel in Illinois schools to use “undesigned” asthma inhalers on hand to treat students who develop respiratory distress. Undesignated medications are those that are not prescribed for a specific student but can be used in an emergency to address any student’s symptoms related to asthma or other respiratory issues.

This order provides the prescription necessary so that every school in the state can have and use this critical medication for asthma attacks at school. Prior to the issuance of the statewide standing order, each school had to seek out and secure their own standing order from a physician in their area. The IDPH standing order streamlines that process and will make it easier for public and private schools in the state to obtain those medications.

“As a pediatrician, I have witnessed how important access to albuterol inhalers can be to save lives,” said Director Vohra. “Inhalers and medications like albuterol are essential treatments to treat severe asthma attacks in students diagnosed with asthma but also in individuals who may not even know they have it. The Governor and General Assembly’s leadership has led to statewide funding for schools to have these undesignated inhalers for their students. This standing order now removes the last hurdle. Illinois schools now have all the tools to obtain, stock, and administer this life-saving medication.”

Under the standing order, when a student known to have asthma or one with no prior history exhibits signs of severe respiratory distress, a school nurse or other trained personnel may administer an approved quick-relief medication such as albuterol through a metered-dose inhaler (MDI). If such medication is administered, the school is required to promptly notify the student’s parents or guardian.

The standing order will enhance the efforts of the RESCUE Illinois Schools program, which was established following the enactment of the asthma medication law, Public Act 100-0726, in 2018. RESCUE is an initiative of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America – MidStates Chapter (AAFA-MidStates), in partnership with the Respiratory Health Association (RHA). AAFA-MidStates worked to secure a \$2.4 million appropriation in the FY23 Illinois state budget to fund the program statewide.

RESCUE Illinois Schools has now provided medication, equipment, and an implementation handbook to more than 3,100, or approximately 80 percent of Illinois public schools. During the first five months of the program, 126 schools in 96 school districts, covering parts of 33 Illinois counties, reported administering the medication to students in respiratory distress, ranging from 5 to 17 years of age. Of those cases, 79 percent of students were able to return to class, 20 percent went home with a parent or guardian for the day, and only two students were transported to hospitals.

“Governor Pritzker, the General Assembly, and IDPH have not just taken the next logical step in keeping children healthy and in school, but they have become absolute leaders across the country,” said Chris Martinez, CEO of AAFA-MidStates. “Every other state in the nation is watching Illinois run this program, in anticipation of helping their schoolchildren in a similar way. I believe Illinois has, and will continue to, embrace this leadership role.”

The IDPH standing order is in effect through February of 2025 and will be reviewed and updated annually.