



Preparing for Pandemic Influenza

Action Steps

April 2009

Planning for pandemic influenza is a health issue that involves all levels of government. Officials need to prepare for and collaborate on efforts to minimize and recover from a potential influenza pandemic. Local governments especially, need to set priorities for maintaining public safety and other essential public services; support local health agencies in providing information to the public and; when necessary, close public buildings and assist in establishing alternative care sites for the delivery of health care to the public.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identify specific activities communities should engage in to be adequately prepared for a potential flu outbreak:

- Establish a Pandemic Preparedness Coordinating Committee that is accountable for articulating strategic priorities and overseeing the development and execution of the operational pandemic plan.
- Ensure existence of a demographic profile of the community (including special needs populations and language minorities) and ensure that their needs are addressed in the operation plan.
- Identify the authority responsible for declaring a public health emergency at the state and local levels and the law enforcement personnel who will maintain public order and implement control measures.
- Establish a procedure to track information daily during a pandemic on the numbers and location of newly hospitalized cases, newly quarantined persons, and hospitals with pandemic influenza cases.
- Work with healthcare partners and other stakeholders to develop state-based plans for vaccine distribution, use, and monitoring; and for communication of vaccine status.
- Implement and maintain, as appropriate, community resources, such as hotlines and Web sites, to respond to local questions from the public and professional groups.

A successful pandemic flu response plan revolves around three key requirements: early detection, prevention, and healthcare. During the early days of a pandemic:

- Surveillance should be increased for ill persons with recent foreign travel.
- Testing of viral samples should be expedited and carried out at a health department laboratory.
- Sick individuals should be isolated to ensure that they get appropriate care.
- Recognition of pneumonia, often associated with flu, should be emphasized so that it can be treated aggressively with antibiotics.
- The movement of individuals who have had contact with ill persons should be investigated and possibly curtailed.

Government agencies and the private sector should expect absenteeism of 40% for two weeks during a pandemic's peak, with fewer employees missing work before and after that period. Some preparedness recommendations for employers and their employees:

- Identify essential functions and personnel beforehand. Cross-train to ensure vital functions continue. Protect and ensure the ready availability of key electronic and hard copy documents.
- Delegate authority beforehand for key decisions, and establish an order of succession in case leaders are incapacitated.
- Consider alternate operating facilities and prepare personnel for an announced relocation of essential functions. Use telecommuting or other "social distancing" steps.
- Implement measures to protect personnel, which include limiting travel to affected areas, replacing face-to-face meetings with teleconferences, posting infection-control guidelines, cleaning frequently touched surfaces like keyboards daily, and, possibly, wearing face masks.

- Establish plans to resume normal operations quickly once a pandemic subsides.

Additionally, it should be the goal of each local municipality to get consistent, accurate information to the public quickly. Inflammatory language should be avoided, as well as misinformation that could cause panic. This is very important, because people who remain calm and knowledgeable will be in the best position to both protect themselves, and prevent further transmission of the disease. Public information will include:

- Issuing recommendations for personal hygiene, including frequent handwashing, covering your mouth when coughing or sneezing, not shaking hands or sharing drinking cups or silverware; and cleaning contact surfaces like phones and desktop surfaces.
- Urging children and adults with symptoms of illness to stay home from school or work.
- Urging citizens to avoid crowds or large public meetings.
- Providing specific information on government, school and/or business closings.
- Issuing travel advisories.

Finally, if a pandemic appears impending, the public should be advised to stockpile at least two weeks' supply of non-perishable food, water, and essential household items, so that they can avoid having to visit public places during the pandemic.

Some of the action steps above are taken from the *Preparatory Checklist for State and Local Officials*, produced by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Others are from individual state plans. Both are available at: www.pandemicflu.gov/ ? State and Local Planning.

Asking the Right Questions...

The media will want to know:

- Is the event and/or risk to the public contained in one small locale or spread across multiple jurisdictions?
- Is the biological agent highly infectious or relatively difficult to transmit?
- Is the biological agent extremely deadly, benign, or dangerous only for specific, vulnerable subgroups?
- Is there any indication of criminal/terrorist activity?
- How would curfews/martial law affect general society? What ends would it achieve? How long would it go on?
- If the government directs everyone to stay at home, how do people get food? Medicine? Other supplies?
- Given food shortages, will there be looting? How should the police react?
- What will the government do about vigilantes that might pop up? What about black marketers?
- Business leaders will want to know:
 - How can I run a business if half my workers refuse to show up?
 - If borders are closed, or supply chains disrupted, how will I run my business?
 - Who is paying for all the extra healthcare? For first responders?

Individuals will want to know:

- Will my employer pay me when the company shuts down its facilities during a pandemic?
- Can I take my money out of the bank? Will the stock market close/crash? Will there be enough money to cover a rush on banks?
- Will my life insurance cover my death? Will I be able to be buried properly? Will this be considered "an act of god"?
- When will schools/businesses/stores reopen?

"Influenza Pandemic Simulation," Booz Allen Hamilton World Economic Forum Simulation, April 27, 2006.

