

Preparing for a Pandemic

What Business and Organization Leaders Need to Know

*Information provided by
Kalamazoo County Health & Community Services.*

Introduction

An influenza, or flu, pandemic happens when a new flu virus appears that easily spreads from person-to-person and around the world. A pandemic flu would spread rapidly and would affect all age groups. It would cause illness in a high proportion of those infected. The World Health Organization warns that a flu pandemic could infect between 25 and 30 percent of the world's population.

With that much of the population and work force affected, a flu pandemic would disrupt your organization—perhaps even force it to close down for a time.

The Federal Government recommends that all employers, governments, and individuals plan with the assumption that:

- Up to 40% of the workforce may be absent for periods of about two weeks or more at the height of a pandemic, with other absences occurring before and after the main peak.
- Employees will choose to stay home from work due to personal illness, to care for an ill family member, or due to fear.
- An individual can be infected with influenza two days before they feel any symptoms. This means that they can start transmitting the virus to others before they even realize they are sick.
- An individual can still pass the virus to others days after they start feeling better.
- Epidemics will last six to eight weeks in affected communities and may reoccur in another wave of illness.

Once a pandemic virus emerges, it is too late to begin planning or to begin collaboration. Experts cannot predict when the next flu pandemic may occur, or how severe it will be, but everyone agrees that preparation is key.

***“But we’re more ready today than we were yesterday.
And we’ll be more prepared tomorrow than we are today.”***

Michael Leavitt, HHS Secretary

Plan now to keep your business or organization going during a pandemic.

“Continuity of operations” means ensuring that essential organization functions can survive a natural disaster, technological failure, human error, or other disruption. In recent times, assuring continuity of operations has also meant planning for terrorist-related biological, chemical or nuclear attacks.

Many existing continuity of operations plans anticipate disruptions such as fire, earthquake, and flood; these events are restricted to a certain geographic area, and the time frames are fairly well defined and limited. A flu pandemic, however, demands a different set of continuity assumptions since it would be widely dispersed geographically and potentially arrive in waves that could last several months at a time.

Depending on the flu strain and based on previous pandemics, public health officials project cumulative absentee rates of 25 percent to 30 percent over three to four months. Absentees will include sick employees and those who must care for others who are sick. Fear will also likely impact rates of absenteeism.

Here are some steps you can take now to maintain business continuity. Keep in mind that many strategies take time to implement.

- Check that existing contingency plans are applicable to a pandemic. In particular, check to see that core business activities can be sustained over several months.
- Clearly document your plans, policies and procedures. Include emergency leave and building closure policies.
- Identify your most essential business functions and services. Include payroll, accounting and administrative functions.
- Assign decision-making authority to your leaders and managers. Determine who will activate your pandemic emergency plan and handle personnel issues, such as absenteeism and off-site working arrangements.
- Outline who will fill key positions and who will serve as back-ups to these positions. Develop job action sheets that give detailed instructions on fulfilling essential job functions.
- Identify and prepare multiple alternate worksites. Use telecommuting and other technologies to allow employees to work from home.
- Make sure you have multiple ways of communicating with your employees and customers in order to limit face-to-face interactions.
- Keep your critical business records and databases up-to-date, backed-up in electronic and hard copy formats, and accessible to all key employees.

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- Update sick leave and family and medical leave policies and communicate with employees about the importance of staying away from the workplace if they become ill. Concern about lost wages is the largest deterrent to self-quarantine.
- Maintain a healthy work environment by ensuring adequate air circulation and posting tips on how to stop the spread of germs at work. Promote hand and respiratory hygiene. Ensure wide and easy availability of alcohol-based hand sanitizer products.
- Educate your employees about your pandemic plans and cross-train back-up personnel for essential job duties. Encourage employee feedback and decision making. In emergencies, employees demonstrate an increased tendency to listen to their employer, so clear and frequent communication is essential.
- Plan to pass decision-making duties and other essential functions to secondary staff. Be prepared to shift your operational headquarters to a regional or subordinate office in a geographic location less affected by the pandemic.
- Plan for how you will lead your business back to normal when the pandemic subsides. Prepare for a permanent loss of some personnel due to deaths or other circumstances.

Protecting Employee's Health

After identifying the core people and skills required to keep the essential parts of your business operating, a pandemic business plan should outline ways to minimize illness among staff and visitors. The main strategies for workplace wellness include:

- **Avoid close contact with people who are sick.** If you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.
- **Stay home when you're sick or have flu symptoms.** Get plenty of rest and check with a health care provider as needed.
- **Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.** It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
- **Clean your hands.** Washing your hands often will help protect you against germs. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.** Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.
- **Practice other good health habits.** Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, eat nutritious foods, and avoid smoking, which may increase the risk of serious consequences if you do contract the flu.

Seasonal Flu vs. Pandemic Flu: What's the Difference?

Seasonal Flu

- Seasonal flu is caused by influenza viruses that are similar to those already affecting people. Flu shots are available every year to protect against seasonal flu.
- Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, headache and muscle pain.
- Healthy adults are usually not at risk for serious complications. The very young, the elderly and people with serious health conditions are at increased risk for serious complications, such as pneumonia or even death.
- The more common flu that spreads each winter generally causes a modest impact on society, for example, some schools are closed and sick people are encouraged to stay home.

Pandemic Flu

- Pandemic flu is caused by a new influenza virus that people have not been exposed to before. Flu shots might not be available during the beginning of the pandemic because large amounts of vaccine cannot be made until experts know what the new virus looks like.
- Symptoms will be similar to the regular flu, but may be more severe and complications could be more serious.
- Healthy adults may face a higher risk for serious complications.
- A severe pandemic could change daily life for some time. People may choose to stay home or be forced to stay home if they are sick or need to care for others. Travel and public gatherings could be limited. Basic services and access to supplies could be disrupted.

What is Bird Flu?

Just like people, birds can get sick from flu viruses, but bird flu viruses rarely infect people. The bird flu that has been spreading quickly among wild birds and poultry in many countries is a very serious type of bird flu called H5N1. Currently, the H5N1 bird flu does not spread easily from person-to-person. Most of the human infections with bird flu in other parts of the world were caused by very close contact with infected birds. In the United States, poultry farms are very careful to prevent disease. Health experts are concerned that H5N1 could change into a virus that easily spreads from person-to-person. Scientists around the world are watching for changes in bird flu viruses because that could signal the beginning of a pandemic.

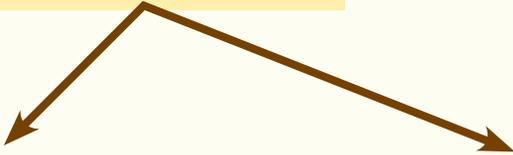
So You Think You Have the Flu

The symptoms of influenza are:

- Fever – low (99 F) to high (104 F), usually for three days, but may persist for four to eight days. Sometimes fever will go away and return a day later.
- Aching muscles
- Cough
- Headache
- Joint aches
- Eye pain
- Feeling very cold or having shaking chills
- Feeling very tired
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose

If you have some of these symptoms listed:

Stay Home
Rest
Drink fluids
Take fever reducers
(acetaminophen or ibuprofen)



But if you

- Are unable to drink enough fluids
- Have the fever for more than three to five days
- Feel better, then develop a fever again



Call your health care provider

Or if you

- Become short of breath or you develop wheezing
- Cough up blood
- Have pain in your chest with breathing
- Have heart disease (like angina or congestive heart failure) and you develop chest pain
- Become unable to walk or sit up, or function normally



Seek immediate medical attention

What to do in the event of an outbreak

If a flu pandemic strikes, government health officials will issue information and warnings, and will work with the media to disseminate advice on how to avoid becoming ill. Your organization's managers, human resources department and employees should pay close attention to the guidance provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (**CDC**), the Michigan Department of Community Health (**MDCH**), and the Kalamazoo County Health & Community Services Department (**KCHCS**). Other organizations that provide assistance in public health emergencies include the American Red Cross and the World Health Organization.

In a worst-case scenario, "business as usual" may cease. Government health officials may have to implement drastic measures, including shutting down certain businesses that involve high levels of interaction with the public, such as restaurants and theaters. Health officials may also have to close schools, restrict travel, and cancel public events such as concerts, conventions, tribal gatherings, and sporting events.

For more information on pandemic flu, visit the following websites or call the telephone numbers provided.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

www.pandemicflu.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

1.800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

inquiry@cdc.gov

Michigan Department of Community Health

www.michigan.gov/mdch

Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services

www.kalcounty.com/hcs

Emergency Hotline: 269-373-5300

Office: 269-373-5200

